

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

The research drew on the triadic semiotic model advanced by Charles Sanders Peirce, comprising icons (signs that express resemblance), indices (signs of causal relations), and symbols (signs of conventional meaning), to examine the representation of Osage cultural identity in Martin Scorsese's *Killers of the Flower Moon* (2023). The aim of the study was to decipher the symbolic meanings embedded in the visual and narrative elements in the film, examining how these signs construct Osage identity amid the tensions between authenticity and narrative marginalization.

The analysis of 17 Data cultural symbols revealed that the film scrupulously reproduces Osage material culture as visual icons, achieving visual authenticity in such things as regalia, architecture (including earth lodges), and rituals (such as pipe burials and naming ceremonies). These icons serve as markers of cultural presence, mooring the narrative in a context of historical specificity. However, the study showed that sheer iconic accuracy is no assurance of semiotic richness. When such symbols are staged without narrative contextual framing such as showing ceremonies without surrounding explanations, they can risk being turned into aesthetic artifacts rather than vessels of cultural meaning.

Crucially, the study recognized indices as powerful signifiers of historical trauma. Recurring motifs such as poison, rain ("cosmic tears"), and the owl (harbinger of death) serve as causal signs, directly referencing the systemic violence the Osage suffered. For example, poison serves as an index of betrayal, its recurrence physically embodying the insidious greed perpetrated against the Osage. Likewise, the appearance of the owl indexically foreshadows death, incorporating Osage cosmology into the film's visual vocabulary. However, the film's focus on trauma indices tends to eclipse signs of resilience, inadvertently circumscribing Osage identity within victimhood.

The most culturally resonant signs became symbols, whose meanings rely upon shared cultural knowledge. The untranslated Osage prayer, *Wahzhazhe* song/dance,

and Osage orthography (e.g., the concluding text "*Wahzhazhe sóンka zhonka e'aha*") function as symbols of survivance conventional signs proclaiming that the Osage "still exist." Their potency resides in their defiance of colonial erasure; by resisting subtitles or translation, they reclaim narrative sovereignty. To non-Osage audiences, however, these symbols might remain inscrutable, belying a tension between cultural specificity and universal accessibility.

This research concludes that although *Killers of the Flower Moon* achieves visual authenticity of Osage culture through iconic representation, the narrative foregrounding of white storylines (Ernest Burkhart, William Hale) delimits the semiotic agency of Osage symbols. Icons and indices, although verifiably rendered, are frequently denied narrative context to complete their enunciation of cultural meaning. In contrast, the climax of the film foregrounding unmediated Osage voices in the *Wahzhazhe* performance illustrates how symbols, when moored in Indigenous self-representation, can move beyond aesthetic commodification to enact cultural continuity.

This study confirms Peirce's model as an effective instrument for analyzing cultural representation in film, especially how icons/indices/symbols combine to build meaning. The triad explains why some signs resonate (e.g., trauma indices) and others need cultural decoding (e.g., untranslated symbols).

Ethical representation requires that visual realism (icons) is accompanied by narrative context facilitating symbolic interpretation. Filmmakers need to work with cultural stakeholders so that signs are not diminished to exotic set dressing but are used as lived expressions of identity.

Research should explore how Osage viewers interpret these symbols in contrast to non-Native audiences, experimenting with Peirce's hypothesis that interpretants differ by experience. Comparative analysis of Indigenous-directed media (e.g., *Reservation Dogs*) might also reveal how narrational control influences semiotic effectiveness.

Finally, *Killers of the Flower Moon* is a testament to both the possibilities and the limitations of Hollywood in portraying Indigenous cultures. Its semiotic richness is

not in discrete icons but in those moments when Osage voices re-appropriate the narrative, turning symbols from relics of the past into statements of continued presence.

