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Social Semiotics in Tintin in Tibet by Georges Remi 'Herge'

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Abstract

The paper examines the graphic fiction Tintin in Tibet *(1960) of Georges Remi 'Herge' from the perspectives of social semiotics. It engages theoretical contributions of Claude Levi-Strauss, Roland Barthes, and Gunther Kress, along with Theo van Leeuwen. Social semiotics studies how signs operate within social contexts, which facilitates meaning through structural oppositions, cultural myths, and multimodal resources. Levi-Strauss's structuralist anthropology emphasizes binary oppositions like life and death, rationality and spirituality, civilization and wilderness which reveals cultural contradictions as modern myth in* Tintin in Tibet. *Furthermore, Barthes reveals the transformation of visual and narrative elements, such as snow, Tibet, and the yeti, into ideological myths of purity, spirituality, and compassion, thereby producing second-order meanings. Moreover, Kress and van Leeuwen's multimodal social semiotics observes Herge's* 'ligne claire' *style within a grammar of images, analyzing spatial design, framing, and colour as active meaning-making means that supplements verbal dialogue. Furthermore, these perspectives present* Tintin in Tibet *as a semiotic artifact that has cultural and ideological values, not merely as children's literature. The paper from the lens of structural, semiotics, and multimodal processes argue that the narrative exaggerates intercultural encounters, the principles of friendship, and the redefinition of human versus non-human boundaries. The study emphasizes the significance of comics as a fertile area for critical semiotic examination combining anthropological, cultural, and multimodal theories. Thus, it emphasizes* Tintin in Tibet *as a text of persistent human importance.*

Keywords: *Binary Opposites, Multimodality, Myths, Semiotics, Social semiotics*

Introduction

The reading of graphic fictions has shifted from observing them as children's entertainment to recognizing them as semiotic systems surrounded in social and cultural contexts. Hergé's *ligne claire* style; visual clarity and narrative precision permit his works to function simultaneously as popular culture and cultural critique. Among the *Tintin* series, *Tintin in Tibet* (1960) stands out for its departure from the political conspiracy and colonial journey themes. It focuses instead on devotion, religiousness,

and virtuous patience. Meaning in the narrative does not emerge through antagonism, but rather through structural oppositions, cultural myths, and multimodal design. This paper approaches the text as both an adventure story and a semiotic artifact that encodes cultural ideologies and moral values.

The study uses the theoretical frameworks, including Claude Lévi-Strauss, Roland Barthes, and Gunther Kress with Theo van Leeuwen. The study examines *Tintin in Tibet* across structural, cultural, and multimodal dimensions in meaning making process. Besides, social semiotics emphasizes that signs operate within social life. It produces and negotiates meaning in culturally specific contexts. Lévi-Strauss's structuralism enables a reading of the graphic fiction as a modern myth that merges contradictions between rationality and spirituality, humanity and otherness. Further, Barthes's semiotics reveals visual and narrative elements in generating myths. Furthermore, Kress and van Leeuwen's multimodal theory simplifies images, layout, and color functioning as meaning-making resources along with language. Consequently, these perspectives position *Tintin in Tibet* as a text of semiotic and human importance.

Tintin in Tibet has been documented for its moral and mystical dimensions. There is insufficient critical attention to the meanings that are constructed with social semiotic processes. The thematic interpretation has been adequately done, whereas the remaining is a systematic analysis of structural oppositions, cultural myths, and multimodal resources collaboratively for producing meaning. This study seeks to address the gap by applying an integrated social semiotic framework.

The objectives of this study are to find the structural oppositions that organize *Tintin in Tibet* as a modern myth and to observe how cultural myths are constructed through denotation and connotation in the narrative.It also considers multimodal resources like image, color, framing, and layout for generating meaning. Further to establish *Tintin in Tibet* as a significant social semiotic text beyond children's literature.

Literature Review

Semiotic reading has evolved from structuralist linguistics to cultural criticism and to multimodal analysis. Lévi-Strauss's *Structural Anthropology* theorizes myth as a system of signs governed by binary oppositions that reflect universal perceptive structures. Further, Barthes extended semiotics into cultural criticism. He demonstrates that everyday texts convert historical realities into naturalized myths. Furthermore, Kress and van Leeuwen extended the field with multimodal social semiotics. They valorize meaning making process produce meaning through the interaction of visual, verbal, and spatial modes within socio-cultural contexts.

Preceding readings on Hergé's *Tintin* series have concentrated on colonial dialogue, political irony, and moral representation in texts like *Tintin in the Congo* and *The Blue Lotus in paarticular*. The studies have not examined *Tintin in Tibet* through an integrated social semiotic framework. The existing scholarship notes the text's moral positioning, mystical tone, and absence of an orthodox villain;

however, a wide-ranging analysis combining structuralism, myth, and multimodality remains unused. This study bridges the gap by presenting the primary text as a text of social semiotics.

Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative interpretive research design grounded in textual and visual analysis. The primary source consists of Hergé's *Tintin in Tibet* (1960). The analysis and interpretation integrate a structuralist, semiotic, and multimodal framework. Lévi-Strauss's method of structural oppositions is identified; Barthes's theory of denotation and connotation is used to analyze cultural myths; and visual – spatial elements are observed through Kress and van Leeuwen's grammar of visual design. This integrated approach confirms systematic and theoretical analysis for demonstrating the text as a semiotic artifact.

Analysis and Discussions

The graphic narrative *Tintin in Tibet* (1960) by Georges Remi 'Herge' holds a distinct place within the Tintin series. It diverges from the series' characteristic political conspiracies, colonial encounters, and detective plots. The Tintin in Tibet series centers on Tintin's unshakable loyalty to his friend Chang. He has been presumed dead in a plane crash in the Himalayas. He believes in Chang's survival. Tintin, boarding a hazardous journey across the snowbound Tibetan landscape, faces avalanches, spiritual revelations, and ultimately, the mythical yeti. Unlike works such as *The Blue Lotus* or *Tintin in the Congo*, which foreground global policies or imperial discourses, *Tintin in Tibet* dramatizes moral endurance, human compassion, and cross-cultural encounter. Because of this departure, the text lends itself to multiple theoretical readings. Claude Levi-Strauss's structuralism, Roland Barthes's semiotics, and Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen's multimodal social semiotic theory elucidate the interplay between verbal and visual modes in Herge's '*ligne claire*' style relating to semiotic connection. Moreover, the framework positions *Tintin in Tibet* not merely as a children's adventure story but as a semiotic artifact that encodes cultural meaning through structural oppositions, symbolic myths, and multimodal design.

At first, the narrative *Tintin in Tibet* exemplifies the principle binary oppositions in several key ways. Claude Levi-Strauss argues that myths are constructed upon binary oppositions. It reflects universal structures of human thought (Levi-Strauss 214). The binary opposition of life and death is the primary concern of the graphic fiction *Tintin in Tibet*. Chang is presumed dead in a plane crash in the Himalayas, but Tintin's belief that Chang is alive stands opposite the rational evidence of his death in a plane crash. The contradiction drags the story forward. It dramatizes the tension between practical reality and personal faith. Another opposition is between civilization and wilderness. The airports, hotels, and monasteries of the organized world of human society are contrasted with the desolate, snowbound Himalayas, where survival is delicate and human control weakens. Further, Tintin represents West whereas the Tibetan monks introduce an alternative epistemology rooted in mysticism and the spiritual

vision of the oriental world. The intuitive monk Phong's vision of Chang troubles Tintin's rationalist framework. It is suggestive that truth may transcend practicality. Finally, the opposition between human and non-human surfaces in the depiction of the yeti: initially casted as a monstrous 'Other', it later emerges as a creature capable of compassion, disrupting the binary itself. For Levi-Strauss, myths reconcile such contradictions rather than resolving them entirely (219). Tintin's reunification with Chang, in this regard, partially complements life and death, rationality and spirituality, and even humanity and otherness, featuring how the graphic fiction functions as a mythic narrative.

Similarly, if structuralism identifies the binary oppositions in *Tintin in Tibet*, it also lights up how these oppositions are mediated. Myths function as cultural mechanisms for Levi-Strauss in negotiating seemingly irreconcilable differences. Tintin's faith facilitates the opposition between life and death. It affirms a third position: the persistence of loyalty. It resists rational evidence. Similarly, the narrative mediates the tension between Western rationalism and Tibetan spirituality. It allows both epistemologies to harmonize. Tintin never fully embraces mysticism, but Phong's vision validates his belief, suggesting that Western skepticism can be complemented – not supplanted/displaced/replaced – by Eastern spiritual knowledge. Even the human versus non – human binary is mediated through the figure of the yeti, who disrupts the stereotype of the monster as threatening and instead embodies selfless care. In this sense, the narrative aligns with Levi-Strauss's idea that myths articulate "a logic of the concrete" by transforming contradictions into symbolic resolutions (221). By framing the Himalayas not only as a place of danger but also of redemption, Herge creates a mythic landscape rewarding Tintin's loyalty, and humanity's boundaries are extended to include the non-human Other. Therefore, the structuralist reading demonstrates *Tintin in Tibet* functioning as a modern myth and weaves together cultural contradictions into a coherent symbolic order.

Secondly, Roland Barthes's semiotics consents for a further examination of the signs rooted in *Tintin in Tibet*. On the denotative level, Herge's clean line drawings present seemingly realistic depictions of planes, mountains, monasteries, and characters. Barthes' denotation existing in isolation is always accompanied by connotation, producing cultural myths (Barthes 113). Tibet in *Tintin in Tibet* is represented as a geographical place. Similarly, it is a symbolic space of spirituality, mysticism, and transcendence. The monks and their visions reinforce a Western myth of Tibet as an exotic and spiritual land, which reflects broader orientalist constructions of Asia. The snow functions as another semiotic code; on the surface, it represents the natural environment, but symbolically, its whiteness connotes purity, emptiness, and existential trial. For example, the avalanche scene stages both physical danger and the overwhelming force of nature against human fragility. Further, the yeti exemplifies Barthes's concept of myth. Initially presented as monstrous, its visual and narrative re-signification turns into a figure of compassion. In the later part of the fiction, Yeti cradles Chang and protects him. The Yeti becomes a mythic figure. It functions as the signifier of misunderstood alterity. It discourages the Western archetype of the monstrous Other. Friendship between Tintin and Chang itself emerges as a Barthesian myth. Tintin's loyalty exceeds rationality and cultural boundaries. It elevates friendship to

a sacred principle. Hence, Barthes's semiotics reveals how Herge's comics naturalize cultural myths, transforming signs into ideologies. It affirms universal values of loyalty, compassion, and intercultural solidarity.

Likewise, the study moves forward for the cultural meaning making process. For Barthesian reading, in relation to colour, the dominance of whiteness in the fiction *Tintin in Tibet* operates as signifiers for Barthes. It accumulates cultural meaning beyond its literal representation (121). The vast expanses of white snow saturating the panels connote both purity and desolation. The white colour used in the graphic fiction signifies the physical harshness of the Himalayas, an uninhabitable space of danger on one hand, and it functions as a metaphorical purification, stripping Tintin's adventure of external villains or political entanglements on the other hand. Unlike other Tintin stories filled with color, political intrigue, and busy settings, the whiteness here suggests an existential trial, a spiritual test of Tintin's moral integrity. The semiotic power of snow has been heightened in moments of crisis, such as when an avalanche buries Tintin and Haddock. The overpowering white panels erase outlines. It presents the destruction of human control. Further, whiteness also becomes a symbol of greatness and superiority: the journey across the snow signifies Tintin's inner quest, a pilgrimage of loyalty, purity, and faith. In Barthes's term, the snow thus functions as a "second-order sign," encoding the myth that purity of friendship and loyalty endure even in the face of absolute emptiness. By interpreting the whiteness semiotically, we see how *Tintin in Tibet* uses visual simplicity not as background but as an active myth-marking device.

Finally, the reading enters the multimodal reading for meaning generating process. in this regard, Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen argue that images, like language, operate with a grammar that organizes meaning through composition, salience, framing, and color (Kress and van Leeuwen 45). *Tintin in Tibet* shows multimodal logic in its panel arrangements and visual design. Similarly, Herge uses '*ligne claire'* style, clean lines, flat colors, and clarity of composition, providing a transparent realism. It encodes meaning through spatial design. For example, the Himalayas are consistently depicted as vast, horizontally expansive panels that dwarf Tintin and Haddock. It highlights human weakness against the natural world. Close-up panels, in contrast, strengthen emotional drama, where Tintin's agonized cries for Chang are visually magnified by Tintin's facial expressions and body postures. The whiteness of snow functions as a background. It creates salience that isolates characters against space. It directs the reader's gaze toward Tintin's determination and struggle. The monk's monastery is framed in vertical compositions that show spiritual elevation and sacred order. In this sense, the comic coordinates meaning through verbal dialogue and visual arrangement that aligns with Kress and van Leeuwen's notion of multimodal texts that integrate multiple semiotic resources. The relationship between text and image creates layers of meaning. Therefore, the silence, whiteness, and the spatial design contribute to the narrative as dialogue.

Further, Kress and van Leeuwen' framework also clarifies how *Tintin in Tibet* redefines the figure of the yeti through multimodal semiotics. The beginning representation of the yeti is portrayed in

shadow, with large footprints and looming shadow signaling danger. Its shape, size, and framing in the panels connote fear and alterity. However, the representation shifts when the yeti is shown caring Chang. Its body posture transforms into protective gestures rather than its monstrosity. The multimodal re-Signification transforms the yeti from 'an abject Other' into 'an empathetic subject'. Significantly, this transformation is not conveyed through dialogue – the yeti never speaks – but through visual semiotics; gestures, shape, size, framing, and the relational placement of figures in the panels. The meaning of the Yeti is produced by visual affordances that dominate its earlier coding as monstrous in multimodal reading. This shift also intersects with Barthes's analysis, as the yeti's visual redefinition creates a new myth of compassion. It also reflects the structuralist opposition between human and non-human, extending humanity's moral boundaries. In this way, Kress and van Leeuwen's multimodal theory reveals the comic communicating profound ethical redefinitions through the organization of image, gesture, and space. It stresses how graphic fiction exceeds the limitations of text alone.

Consequently, together with the insights of Levi-Strauss, Roland Barthes, and Kress, along with van Leeuwen, *Tintin in Tibet* emerges as a text that operates simultaneously as myth, semiotic system, and multimodal artifact. Structuralist analysis emphasizes how binary oppositions such as life and death, civilization and wilderness, rationality and spirituality, and human and non-human are facilitated through the narrative's mythic structure that culminates in Tintin's reunion with Chang. Barthes's semiotics uncovers the cultural myths encoded in the signs of the comic, from Tibet a spiritual landscape, to snow a sign of purification, to the yeti as a compassionate Other. Kress and van Leeuwen's multimodal social semiotics reveals how meanings are composed through dialogue and through spatial design, color, shape, size, framing, and visual composition. The whiteness of snow and the framing of the yeti function as critical semiotic resources. The frameworks reveal that *Tintin in Tibet* transcends its surface narrative. It functions as a cultural artifact. It encodes both universal myths and specific ideological constructions. Therefore, *Tintin in Tibet* should not be confined only to children's literature or escapist adventure. It has established its recognition as a semiotic text. It has engaged with fundamental human questions about loyalty, purity, honesty, compassion, and intercultural understanding.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated *Tintin in Tibet* as a layered social semiotic artifact. Through structural oppositions, cultural myths, and multimodal design, the text vividly presents universal human concerns of devotion, consideration, and moral responsibility. Lévi-Strauss's structuralism reveals its mythic logic; Barthes's semiotics exposes ideological naturalization; and Kress and van Leeuwen's multimodality highlights the integration of visual and verbal resources. Consequently, *Tintin in Tibet* exceeds the category of children's literature to emerge as a culturally and semiotically significant work. The study opens up further insights yet to come for enhancing the unending cognitive and intellectual arena. The graphic fiction *Tintin in Tibet* can be studied as the Western understanding of Eastern mysticism, like the myth of the Yeti, a snowman.

The manuscript of the article is original and has not been published or sent for publication anywhere. It is the intellectual property of Assistant Professor Kul Bahadur Rana, contact number +977-9841378148 and email address – kulrana179@gmail.com, who works at Padma Kanya Multiple Campus (T.U.). Bagbazar, Kathmandu, Nepal.

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