

Danielle Arlotta

The Goal is a visual response by artist and director Smriti Keshari commissioned by NOWNESS¹ to engage with songs from an album produced by the Leonard Cohen Estate after the artists passing in 2016. In this presentation I analyze Keshari's short film using the semiotic method. I will discuss how the artist employs icons and signs to convey meaning. I will unpack a few key images used in the piece, breaking down the signs into signifier and signified and each image's denoted and connoted meanings. I will explore Keshari's use of connotation procedures and use of appropriated imagery in combination with the piece's context and how this conveys the work's message. Keshari employed a team of researchers to examine Cohen's discography and to compile a list of 1,244 keywords that exemplified the themes of his work. Keshari used these keywords to find these images that she then crafted into the piece. "No single image is out of place," says Keshari. "We honor Cohen's verses by connecting images... to his... visual language. (Nowness, 2019).

The photograph is a message with a source of emission. In this instance, Nowness and Keshari, is a channel of transmission. The video itself, is a point of reception, us acting as viewers. The photographs relay their messages to us through denoted, the literal object of the image, and connoted, implied or suggested, meanings. For example, the picture of two rings on a pillow has a denoted meaning of just that, two rings on a pillow. The connoted meaning is of marriage, devotion and love and the pillow connotes the wedding bed, and intimate union. The images in the film are a series of signs that work like words in a language to convey their meaning. A grouping of icons (objects with specific links to what it represents), indexes, (causal links, i.e.

¹ a company centered around music and video

smoke to fire), and symbols (objects have no links to what they represent but are agreed upon by most to mean those things). Through these signs, and the connotation procedure of syntax, Keshari imparts meaning by choosing and arranging the photos. She connotes meaning through juxtaposition and repetition. "The signifier of connotation is then no longer to be found at the level of any one of the fragments of the sequence but at that of the concatenation" (Barthes, p.24). The sum of the images creates the meaning. For example, an image of stained glass and a picture of a snake have individual denotations, but showing both, the connotation could be to the Christian religion and the story of Adam and Eve.

The use of appropriated imagery works to position Cohen's life within history, widens the range of who can read the work, and acts as a metaphor for the sum of a lifetime. The video is short and packed, as is life. The pace of the film mirrors the rhythm of the music. You are left with a different reading each time because the quick pace is faster than the human eye can process. Depending on the individual, different things will stick in their mind after viewing. In addition, the lyrics of the song inform the images as well. As Barthes says in his essay, the words inform the reading of the denoted and affect the connotation. "As for the fall, it began long ago, can't stop the rain, can't stop the snow" sings Cohen. When heard in combination to the stained glass and snake, the religious connotation is amplified. "Settling at last accounts of the soul," when sung over an image of the ground connotes the grave and death. When viewed within the context of Cohen's posthumous album, the entire film takes on greater significance. These elements together - the visual, aural, and foreknowledge - work to convey Keshari's message that Cohen's work is impactful, universal and poignant; that life is short and his was a complicated one that we can learn from. Keshari says, "This is designed to be watched again and again, as an ode to his towering work. Every time you watch this film you will see something new... a

journey into Leonard Cohen's stream of consciousness, he was a poet of brokenness, loss, redemption, devotion, love, vanity, sex, violence and so much more" (Nowness, 2019).

Works Cited

Barthes, Roland, and Stephen Heath. *Image, Music, Text*. Hill and Wang, 1978

NOWNESS, <https://www.nowness.com/series/thanks-for-the-dance-leonard-cohen/the-goal-by-smriti-keshari>

Sturken, Marita, and Lisa Cartwright. *Practices of Looking: an Introduction to Visual Culture*. Oxford University Press, 2018.