

A Peircean Semiotic Analysis Of the Short Film *Anuja* (2024): Symbol, Icon, and Index

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Abstract

This paper analyses the signs present in the short film Anuja (2024), directed by Adam J. Graves. The study of signs is known as Semiotics. Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce are regarded as the pioneers of semiotics. Saussure termed it as Semiology, and he referred to signs as the combination of the signifier and the signified. His study is considered structural and rigid. Whereas, Charles Sanders Peirce is the contemporary originator who preferred the term Semiotics. Peirce introduced the triadic model of signs, which consists of a representamen (signifier), an interpretant (signified), and an object (referent). Further, he divided representamen into three categories based on the relation to objects. They are Symbol, Icon, and Index. In this paper, the signs in the film are identified and segregated based on Peirce's Triadic Model, and a detailed analysis is conducted. The paper demonstrates how the film's signs contribute to its exploration of cultural and societal narratives, reflecting on themes of ambition, identity, self-discovery, and societal expectation as a cultural process rather than a rigid structure, aligning with Peirce's view of meaning being generated, accepted, and subverted within cultural contexts.

Keywords: Sign, Semiotics, Peirce, Symbol, Icon, Index

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I. Introduction

Films reflect human life and portray stories connected to it, which are relatable to them. A film is a form of entertainment, but at the same time, it also serves as a messenger for meaningful stories or events. It portrays social realities through visual screens. It reflects and reconstructs social issues such as gender, caste, class, politics, and more. It serves as a mirror of society. Films are long-form content, whereas Short Films aim to convey the story's meaning in a shorter running time. According to the 91st Academy Awards Special Rules for the Short Film Awards, “[a] short film is defined as an original motion picture with a running duration of 40 minutes or less, including all credits” (qtd. in Jia 1164). Short films usually have open endings, encouraging viewers to interpret their own conclusion based on their understanding and the clues provided throughout the film. They are often open-ended because there can be two types of endings: one positive and one negative, allowing viewers' imaginations to consider both and determine which one fits best.

Films are a combination of images played together to form a moving picture that tells a story. Every image carries signs, and these signs represent meanings. To understand these meanings, it is important for the audience to recognize the signs and interpret them accordingly. In films, signs are in the form of audio and visuals, including gestures, objects, clothing, sounds, dialogue, and everything present in the film. Signs are something that indicate something else. The study of signs is Semiotics. Ferdinand de Saussure, a Swiss linguist and philosopher, and Charles Sanders Peirce, an American philosopher, are both recognized as the pioneers of Semiotics. However, Saussure is often referred to as the ‘father of semiotics’, although he called it Semiology. Saussure’s sign system employs a dyadic model.

Saussure names these two parts of the sign the “signifier” and the “signified.” “Signifier” refers to a meaningful form, while “signified” designates the concept which that form evokes. Within the linguistic system the signifier would be what Saussure calls a “sound-image,” that is, the image of one of those sounds which we shape within our minds when we think whereas the signified would be the meaning which that sound-image generates. (Silverman 6)

It is structural because it only concerns the sign system of language, making it a linguistic model that is quite rigid. As a linguist, his primary focus was on the linguistic aspects of sign systems. On the other hand, Charles Sanders Peirce is considered as the contemporary semiotician who preferred the term Semiotics. He defined

A sign ... is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. That sign which it creates I call the *interpretant* of the first sign. The sign stands for something, its *object*. It stands for that object, not in all respects, but in reference to a sort of idea which I have sometimes called the *ground* of the representamen. (qtd. in Chandler 31)

Peirce classified his study of semiotics into a 'Triadic model of signs', which included "[a] representamen: the perceptible form that the sign takes – the 'sign vehicle'; [a]n object: something to which the sign refers (a referent), or which it represents; and [a]n Interpretant: the effect produced by the sign or the sense made of it" (qtd. in Chandler 31). Furthermore, he divided the representamen into three categories based on their relation to objects. They are Symbol, Icon, and Index. A Symbol "is a sign which refers to the object that it denotes by virtue of a law, usually an association of general ideas, which operates to cause the symbol to be interpreted as referring that Object" (qtd. in Silverman 20). Icons are representations where the signifier resembles the object it represents. There is an imitative relationship between the signifier and the signified. The iconic sign "resembles its conceptual object in certain ways. It may share certain of the properties which that object possesses, or it may duplicate the principles according to which that object is organized" (Silverman 19). And, Indices are instances in which the signifier is directly related to the signified in some way. The indexical sign is defined by Peirce as "a real thing or fact which is a sign of its object by virtue of being connected with it as a matter of fact and by also forcibly intruding upon the mind, quite regardless of its being interpreted as a sign" (qtd. in Silverman 19).

According to Peirce, the meaning of a sign can be generated, accepted, and subverted as part of a cultural process. His semiotic model holds that meaning arises through interpretation. He "gave a pragmatic account of the nature of meaning" (Nöth 43), which emphasizes practical meaning. He asserts that interpretation must be generated in real-world consequences and not just in abstract thoughts or ideas. Peirce also discusses "[t]he 'infinite series' to which any given interpretation belongs suggests a closed semiotics, what Eco in *A Theory of Semiotics* calls an 'unlimited semiosis'" (Silverman 15). The term 'Unlimited Semiosis', refers to the fact that signs generate another sign in our mind, and that process goes on, and hence the interpretation becomes unlimited. Kaja Silverman quotes Peirce, "The object of representation can be nothing but a representation of which the first representation is the interpretant" (15). According to him, interpretations are open-ended, it is never entirely ending. Also, in terms of film, Peter Wollen discusses the sign as a triptych in cinema; it refers to index, icon, and symbol (102).

In this paper, the signs in the short film *Anuja* are identified and segregated based on Peirce's triadic model of sign, i.e., icon, index, symbol, and a detailed analysis of the selected signs. The paper uses Peirce's semiotic framework over Saussure's for the film analysis, as Kaja Silverman states,

Saussure's scheme provides no way of distinguishing between linguistic signifiers, photographic signifiers, or signifiers generated by the codes of editing, camera movement, lighting, and sound.

Peirce's scheme... enables us to make a number of valuable distinctions. By means of it we are able to note that whereas the relation of linguistic signifiers to their signifieds is primarily conventional, with elements of iconicity and indexicality, the signifiers of photography, editing, camera movement, lighting, and sound are characterized by a preponderance of indexical or iconic properties. (22)

The short film *Anuja* is directed by Adam J. Graves and has a runtime of 23 minutes. It earned an Oscar nomination in 2025. The film is set in Delhi, featuring scenes in a garment factory and on the streets. It is a touching short film that explores several themes such as self-discovery, identity, and the expectations that society places on individuals. The narrative follows the principal character, Anuja (Sajda Pathan), as she navigates several challenges that are personal and the societal constraints in order to choose her future. It is a story of two orphaned sisters, Palak (Ananya Shanbhag) and Anuja, who work in a garment factory to survive. The elder sister, Palak acts as a mother figure and cares for her younger sister, Anuja. The younger one has exceptional math skills and can solve numerical problems in minutes, which would take others a calculator to solve. Mr. Mishra (Gulshan Walia), a school teacher, offers her a rare opportunity to take an entrance exam. If she passes, she could receive a scholarship at Williams, a boarding school. She would have an opportunity to alter her future. To take the exam, they need to pay a fee of four hundred rupees. Palak makes cloth bags in the factory with considerable efficiency, unbeknownst to the floor manager, and attempts to sell them in order to collect money. Despite the lack of buyers, they continue their pursuit. Anuja accidentally enters a mall, and looking at the prices of other items, she raises the price of the bags to four hundred rupees, which they had initially decided to sell at forty rupees. A lady purchases two bags inside the mall for eight hundred rupees. Palak instructs Anuja to take the exam on Tuesday using the money they have earned. On the day of the exam, Palak helps Anuja to get everything required for the exam and sends her off. Though everything is arranged, Anuja struggles between her ambition and familial duty as the factory supervisor (Nagesh Bhonsle), upon recognising Anuja's talent, tries to offer her an alternative position and asks her to be present at his office on the

day of the exam, which is Tuesday. He even warns her that if she declines his offer, she and her sister can go and find another job. The story is open-ended, allowing viewers to decide whether she took the exam.

II. Peircean Categorization Of Select Signs

Sl.no	Representamen (Visual/Audio sign)	Object (What it Refers to)	Peircean Category	Interpretation
1.	sewing machine (Throughout the film)	Dream and aspiration	Symbol	The sewing machine functions as a symbol of Anuja and Palak's dream. As the sewing machine operates to stitch garments, it is a pursuit of stitching of their dreams and aspirations
2.	Handbags (00:08:61)	Weight and burden	Symbol	The bags symbolize both the weight of responsibilities and the burden of their aspirations. They represent to carry the weight of hopes and dreams.
3.	Selling bags on the street (00:08:61)	Anuja and Palak working towards their dream	Symbol	Symbolically represents the pursuit of the sisters to work towards their dreams
4.	Noise on the street (00:08:71)	It serves as a representation of the noise that is the characteristic of society.	Icon	The street noise reflects the chaos and restlessness of the surroundings. The characters in the midst of this chaos, where their individual voices are easily drowned out highlights their marginalized experience.
5.	Dress on display mannequin (00:09:96)	Labour is visible through the dress, but the dress maker's identity is obscured	Index	The display of dress highlights the irony that the product receives admiration and value while the worker who created it remains invisible.
6.	The song 'Ude Jab Jab Zulfen' (00:11:62)	Represents a new era for Anuja and Palak	Symbol	Symbolically marks the moment of transition and the beginning of a hopeful phase
7.	Tuesday (00:12:69)	representing courage, strength, and boldness	Symbol	Represents courage and determination. Culturally, the day is linked to strength and boldness
8.	The famous story of Panchatantra, "The Loyal Mongoose" (00:00:82-00:02:41)	Wise decision making	Symbol	Importance of thoughtful judgment and allows the audience to decide the ending of the story

Discussion: Semiotic Analysis Of the Select Symbols, Icons, And Indices

This section of the paper discusses the table above, providing a descriptive explanation of the signs it presents.

The short film shows Anuja and Palak, the two sisters working in a garment factory. The 'sewing machine' in the factory is a symbol. It is the pursuit of Anuja and Palak as they work towards their dreams, the stitching of their dreams and aspirations. As the sewing machine stitches garments, it metaphorically represents the process of stitching their dreams together. Their labour reflects their desire to build a future beyond their present socio-economic constraints.

The 'Handbags' (00:08:61) that Palak sews serve as symbols. The bags symbolize both the weight of responsibilities and the burden of their aspirations. Bags are meant to carry things, but they function symbolically as vessels that carry more than material objects. They represent to carry the weight of hopes and dreams. The bags act as signs that show the aspirations and dreams that Palak carries herself. By selling the bags, they attempt to manage some money so Anuja can take the entrance exam for an opportunity to study at a school that offers a scholarship. Due to her aptitude in mathematics, the probability of her being accepted is extremely high. Palak's sole aspiration is to work to improve Anuja's life. However, Anuja also wants her sister to get married, and she believes the money they collect should be saved aside to facilitate her sister's wedding. The bags are in bright colours, including yellow and red. Vibrant colours symbolize vivid and optimistic aspirations. Anuja chooses a pink bag for herself; in this case, pink represents innocence and purity, conveying hope and childhood innocence.

Palak and Anuja venture onto the street to sell the bags (00:08:61) that Palak crafted from leftover factory materials. They try to sell the bags by shouting on the street, but nobody is interested. This act of selling bags also symbolizes the sisters' determination to work to build a better future. Palak suggests they shout a bit louder, "*Thoda aur jor se chilate hain*" (00:08:86), but as she does, she is drowned out by the loud music on the street. The noise on the street is an icon (00:08:71), as "[t]he sound-track, exclusive of music, is primarily iconic, simulating the noises of speech, sirens, horns, screams, doors opening and closing, birds, barking dogs, etc." (Silverman 23). It serves as a representation of the noise that characterizes society. In a world filled with constant noise, their voices can easily get drowned out. Regardless of how loudly a girl may shout, her voice

becomes overwhelmed by the surrounding community's noise. And if she comes from a working-class background and is an orphan, her chances decrease even further.

Anuja gets separated from Palak and walks into a shopping mall. Upon entering, she notices that everything is expensive and the people seem different from those at street markets. She boldly raises the price of the bags she was selling from forty rupees to four hundred rupees. She enters a store within the mall, and it is the section dedicated to bags, where she sells two bags to a woman, each for four hundred rupees. The store manager notices what is happening and instructs the security guard to apprehend her, but she attempts to flee and is unable to do so. She conceals herself in the clothing section of the store, where she sees a dress on a display mannequin (00:09:96). The camera captures the visual details of the dress, especially the bow, which Anuja recognizes as her own creation while Palak sewed the rest of the dress. The irony lies in the fact that the dress is treated with utmost respect and dignity, yet the person who made it is being pursued. The dress functions as an index, a direct representation of her work. While the garment visibly carries the trace of her craftsmanship, her identity as the artist remains unrecognized. The film explores the concept of creating an identity through education.

The use of music in film relates to the concept of diegesis, where the music or song reflects the situation. Anuja and Palak use the money they earned to watch a movie at a theater. The song "*Ude Jab Jab Zulfen*" (00:11:62) appears on the hall's screen. The song originates from the film *Naya Daur*, which means 'The New Era' in English. The song acts as a symbol, representing a new era for Anuja and Palak. It marks the moment of transition in both sisters' lives. With the money, Anuja can now attend the entrance exam, which costs her four hundred rupees in fees. This song signifies the start of a new chapter for the two girls. Anuja is sceptical about the decision to spend money on the exam instead she believes it should be saved for Palak's wedding. Palak advises her not to think that way, as she does not believe her sister, Anuja, is destined for a factory job. Their mother would have disapproved and wanted her to attend school. Palak helps Anuja understand that going to school could significantly change her life and offer a new beginning.

Anuja's scheduled entrance exam is set for Tuesday (00:12:69). In the film, Tuesday is chosen out of all seven days, it is a symbol. Culturally, it is the day which is linked to Mars (*Mangal*) which is seen as the celestial body representing courage, strength and boldness. The day arrives when Anuja must summon the courage to defy the factory manager's counsel to work in the factory and instead proceed with taking the exam, the courage to choose the path that could change her future.

Whether Anuja takes the exam is not explicitly shown in the film. It is open for interpretation, but the conclusion can be interpreted based on the beginning of the film. In the beginning of the short film, the famous story of *Panchatantra*, "The Loyal Mongoose" (Sharma 432), (*Brāhmaṇasya Nakulaḥ*) (00:00:82–00:02:41), is narrated by Palak to Anuja. As audience, the moral of the story is 'Don't perform hasty actions. Think before you act'. This story is significant in the film as the film puts Anuja, the main protagonist, in a critical phase of her life where she must make a wise decision. She faces a choice between pursuing her ambition for a better future and her concern for her sister's marriage, along with the possibility that her sister might lose her job at the garment factory if she disregards the factory manager's advice and decides to take the exam. The story's importance lies in the fact that the film does not reveal whether Anuja actually takes the exam. However, her choice could either transform her life or lead to lifelong regret for missing the opportunity. The ending suggests that this is a moment when Anuja must make a thoughtful decision without rushing and consider her options carefully. Based on the message conveyed in the short film, viewers might interpret that Anuja chose wisely and followed the moral of "The Loyal Mongoose" from *Panchatantra*. Though open to interpretation and based on the clues in the film, it is possible to conclude that she may have decided to take the exam.

III. Colour Semiotics Of Costumes

Costumes are a vital part of a film. They visually communicate the characters' personality traits. The costumes speak for themselves through visuals. Both the costumes and their colours generate meaning as "colour is also used to convey 'interpersonal' meaning [j]ust as language allows us to realize speech acts, so colour allows us to realize 'colour acts' (Kress 348). It is significant to discuss the costumes and their colours in the short film because they act as symbols.

Colour for Peirce is *not* deterministic, but fluid and variant, in the flux of perpetual change. [...] he proposes *the structuring of 'habit'*, since the character of the sensory core is determined by the generative functioning of habit. [...] Peirce's arguments thereby assert colour, colour naming and categorisation to be *socially generated historical prostheses* – the production of an *exosomatic organ*. Thus colour has no 'immediacy' or predetermined givenness, as colour science asserts, but evolves as part of a historic, dynamic, complex 'sign – system'. (qtd. in Almalech 750)

The following is the list of costume colours as studied in the section, arranged in tabular form and discussed in detail below.

Sl.no	Representamen (colour of costume)	Object (What it Refers to)	Peircean Category	Interpretation
1.	Anuja wears a yellow frock. On contrast, Palak on dark-coloured dress (00:01:77) Fig. 1	Yellow: Hope of possibility of a better future Dark colour: Limited hope	Symbol	Anuja in bright colours as a symbol of the potential for a better life and brighter future. Whereas, Palak’s darker clothes reflect her more grounded and suggests the uncertainty of personal advancement
2.	Dark green (dark cyan) (00:08:61) Fig. 2	colour of growth and ambition	Symbol	Palak is completely focused on selling her bags, demonstrating a strong business oriented behaviour
3.	The brown (00:15:71) vs the yellow and white (00:16:96) Fig. 3	Brown: roughness or ruggedness, suggesting dirt and corruption. Yellow and white together: innocence and purity	Symbol	The contrast between brown and the combination of yellow and white creates a symbolic opposition of roughness and innocence.
4.	Yellow coloured dress (00:19:55) Fig.4 (left)	Yellow signifies knowledge and hope	Symbol	Yellow symbolizes knowledge, optimism, and possibility of intellectual advancement
5.	Plain dark blue salwar (00:19:73) Fig. 4 (right)	Calmness and invisibility	Symbol	Palak is in plain dark blue salwar where the colour dark blue signifies calmness in the chaos and blending into the invisibility of the background

In the film, the character Anuja wears frocks, and Palak wears salwars, which are mostly dull and worn out which represents their social status. It reflects their life as member of the working class and highlights their poverty. Whenever they are working in the factory, they are seen wearing dull clothes, which illustrates the struggle in their lives. But the first scene in which both the character appears in the same frame, the contrast in the colour of the dresses symbolically differentiates the sisters’ position in the story. In Fig 1, Anuja (right) appears in a bright yellow frock (00:01:77, Fig.1). She appears in bright colours as a symbol of the potential for a better life and brighter future for her if she passes the entrance exam for a scholarship to study. In contrast, Palak’s darker clothing reflects her grounded and restrained situation suggesting the uncertainty of her personal advancement.



Fig.1. Palak and Anuja in contrasting colors at the beginning of the film, Screenshot 00:01:77



Fig.2. Anuja and Palak on their way to sell the bags, Screenshot 00:08:61

As shown in Fig. 2, Palak is wearing a dark green salwar with printed trousers, and Anuja is dressed in a printed colourful frock as they go about selling their bags. The clothes are colourful and moderately bright.

The dark green (dark cyan) colour stands for the colour of growth and ambition. Palak is completely focused on selling her bags, demonstrating a strong business oriented behaviour. However, the colour of Anuja's dress signifies supportive nature for her sister.



Fig.3. Anuja and the Factory Manager, Screenshot 00:15:71 (left) and 00:16:96 (right)

Fig. 3 shows Anuja and the garment factory manager in his office where the Manager asks her questions related to Maths, to calculate the time to finish an order. Anuja tells it correctly, hence the yellow coloured dress which she is wearing in the scene signifies knowledge and intelligence. The Garment Factory manager in Fig. 3 (left), is wearing a brown shirt which signifies roughness or ruggedness, suggesting dirt and corruption. He is shown as an intimidating person to Anuja in this scene. He calls her to be there on Tuesday at his office, the day of her examination telling her that he has a better job offer for her. He does not want her to appear for the exam. He wants to erode her down. Hence, the brown colour truly signifies him and his evil intentions. Another picture in Fig. 3 (right), presents Anuja in a yellow dress with white floral patterns and white puffed sleeves. The yellow colour signifies her fragility but at the same time it is also associated with innocence and hope in children. Since white is for purity, so yellow and white together signify innocence and purity. But the colour yellow is not bright but slightly faded and muted which can be a reflection of the brown colour worn by the manager, where brown is overpowering the yellow and white, which also shows the power dynamics and creates tension in the scene. The two in the same frame present a contrast, the brown vs the yellow and white which creates a symbolic opposition. This creates a rough and rude person's presence versus a child's innocence.



Fig.4. Anuja on her way to the exam centre, Palak accompanying her to the road, Screenshot 00:19:55 (left), 00:19:73 (right)

Fig.4. presents Anuja and Palak, where Anuja is ready and about to leave to write the entrance exam. She is wearing a bright printed dress, where yellow signifies knowledge and hope. The colour signifies that if she writes the exam, she will have the opportunity to study at a boarding school on scholarship and can build a promising future. The colour also appears vibrant against the chaotic background. Whereas, Palak is in plain dark blue salwar where the colour dark blue signifies calmness in the chaos and blending into the invisibility of the background. It also signifies the harsh reality of living a struggling life, as opposed to the brightness of yellow, which still has hope. The other image on the right shows how Palak is merged into the background and remains stationary, signifying her stagnant current life. In contrast, Anuja is seen moving forward from that life, as she goes on the way to the exam centre.

IV. Semiotic Deciphering Of The Title And Poster

The word Anuja means 'younger sister'. The short film, named after the younger sister Anuja, is titled accordingly. While, the story primarily focuses on Anuja, the title's implication of a younger sister also suggests the existence of an elder sister, indicating that the narrative involves both sisters. It examines Anuja's life and how her elder sister's experiences might also be influenced.

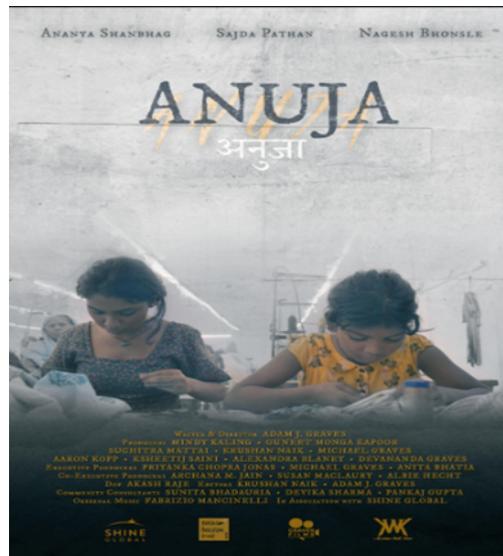


Fig.5. Poster of the short film *Anuja*, Screenshot IMDB

A film poster tells a story; it is noteworthy what can be inferred from a single image. The poster of a film can embody all three, i.e. icon, index and symbol. The poster can be considered an icon, where the characters and the objects depicted are representations of what appears in the film. It can be considered an index as whatever is shown in the poster exists in the film. And it is symbol because everything that is present in the poster carries meaning behind it which is not related to anything else, but can be understood through cultural codes. The poster for the film depicts Palak and Anuja both working in a garment factory. The colours of the dresses worn by the sisters are completely opposite. Palak is dressed in darker shades, while Anuja wears bright yellow. This use of colour is significant. It also hints at their futures. Palak, already working in a garment factory, is somewhat settled in her situation. Conversely, Anuja has better opportunities awaiting her. The yellow colour symbolises creativity and strong mental acuity. It suggests turning challenges into opportunities. Additionally, the title *Anuja* written in Black and a translucent highlight of the same in italics in yellow colour shows that her bright future is hidden behind this darkness. She has to come out of it to find it.

V. Conclusion

Meanings are created through signs. It is important to recognise these signs and make an interpretation to make sense of the reading of any text. Similarly, to understand the undertones of a film every sign in a film is important to interpret and understand to make sense of the message in a film. The short film *Anuja* carries signs that are interpreted in order to make sense of every act that follows another. The moral of the *Panchatantra* story is crucial for interpreting the ending. The handbags made by Palak are a symbol of Anuja and Palak's dream and aspiration. The sewing machine in the factory is the symbol of an aid working towards their dreams. The dress in the shopping mall symbolizes the labour of the girls, but it does not give them an identity. Such kind of dresses are made by people like Anuja and Palak, but in the end, it gets the tag of a branded company and are sold at big shops at high prices. Since their identity is concealed, one aspect of the film is identity building and the importance of education in identity building in the society and it also portrays self-discovery. Therefore, films contain signs that need to be interpreted for an in-depth understanding.

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