

Decoding Power: The Semiotics of Apartheid

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Introduction: Why Semiotics?

Semiotics and International Relations

There is very little, if any, overlap between Semiology and International Relations, even though they are both situated squarely in the Humanities. If I were to draw a Venn diagram to illustrate this phenomenon, each field of study would be an untethered circle, isolated entirely from the other. Semiotics, as the study of signs, has historically been concerned with symbolic texts and linguistic practices. International Relations, conversely, focuses on the material and legal aspects of states, institutions, and structures of power. The disjuncture between the two fields is striking. While scholars of International Relations examine treaties, wars, and the notion of sovereignty, a Semiotician analyses novels, gestures, and scenes in films. Yet these domains are not as far apart as the disciplinary boundaries imply.

Apartheid is a political order rooted in International Relations, but cannot be understood in its entirety as such, as is colonial and indigenous self-determination. These, however, are also symbolic orders and as such, their semiotic dimensions must be recognised. Not only are apartheid states sustained by economic structures, law, and military power; they also rely on a complex nexus of signs from architectural codes and discursive stereotypes to racial codification and symbols of separation. To analyse apartheid without semiotics would be to overlook how profoundly its violence was encoded in meaning and representation. In the same vein, resistance to apartheid was also semiotic, cropping up in banned literature, murals, rituals, and slogans, constituting acts of counter-signification.

Semiotics offers scholars of International Relations a unique set of conceptual tools which can be used to interrogate the symbolic foundations of international politics. By drawing attention to signs, it is revealed how borders, nationhood, racialised orders, and sovereignty are not solely material arrangements, but ones which spill over into the realm of semiotic practices where there are sustained or contested. Power relies upon mythologies in order to render ideology natural

(Barthes, 1972: 31). In contexts of apartheid, racial segregation is naturalised not only through law, but also through signs on benches, maps of segregated territories, and portrayals in the media. Therefore, semiotics can be seen as providing a unique vantage point from which to interrogate and decode how the political order was communicated, encoded, and resisted.

Purpose and Rationale

The purpose of developing a semiotic framework of analysis for this paper is twofold. Firstly, it seeks to fill a gap in the literature. The ‘cultural turn’ (Bleiker, 2001: 509) in International Relations allowed for the entrance of postcolonialism and poststructuralism into the otherwise rigid discipline, but semiotics has not been applied systematically in the study of international politics (Hansen, 2016: 314). Secondly, the framework will evolve into a methodological toolkit to analyse apartheid not only as a political regime, but a semiotic one. Apartheid encodes colonial self-determination and domination in manners which transcend the legal and material spheres and is an inscription of racial hierarchy into everyday life. Apartheid does not only make use of administrative tools, but also semiotic technologies which codify and discipline bodies using both visible and invisible hierarchies.

The rationale for this framework is grounded in the recognition that self-determination under apartheid, and settler colonial regimes at large, operates on numerous registers. Apartheid extends to the economic, juridical, and military realm, among others, but also the semiotic realm. A comprehensive examination must analyse how these registers intersect. Without semiotics, the ways in which power reproduces itself by shaping meaning will be overlooked. Without International Relations, semiotics may very well float into abstraction, disconnected from the material realities of global politics. The framework created in this paper seeks to bridge this divide.

How This Framework Interacts With Postcolonial and Subaltern Theories

Ever since its inception, postcolonial theory has emphasised that colonialism was not only a political project, but also a cultural one. The domination of the Middle East by Europe was not sustained only by economic and military tactics, but maintained by discursive constructions which posited the ‘Orient’ as exotic and inferior (Said, 1977: 62). Similarly, colonial epistemologies have silenced marginalised voices to a point where it had to be asked whether the subaltern had the ability to speak or not (Spivak, 1988: i). In line with this discussion it must be

highlighted that ambivalence, hybridity, and mimicry are all tactics employed by postcolonial and subaltern theorists, and this framework seeks to emphasise these (Bhabha, 1994: 21).

This framework will interact with postcolonial and subaltern theories, extending their insights into the realms of International Relations and Semiology. Apartheid cannot be reduced to a canon of legal instruments and military policies. Instead, it must be analysed as a semiotic order which centralises symbols and discourses. By incorporating postcolonial and subaltern perspectives, this framework illustrates that signs are not only imposed from above but also appropriated from below. Indigenous self-determination seeks to re-signify the symbols of colonial self-determination under apartheid and transform them into instruments of critique and resistance and the attempts on the part of the state to monopolise meaning are subverted.

The framework resonates with the shift toward decolonial studies within global ideology. This shift states that knowledge production itself is entangled in colonality (Mbembe, 2001: 83). Combining International Relations with semiotics and anchoring these disciplines to postcolonial and subaltern theories allows for an intersectional analysis of self-determination within contexts of apartheid. The convergence of these disciplines and theories allows for the tracing of the trajectory of apartheid, situating it as a colonial semiotic order and illustrating how it was contested through indigenous epistemologies and symbolic practices.

Relevance For Interpreting Self-Determination in Contexts of Apartheid

Regimes of domination sustain themselves through representation. Therein lies the relevance of semiotics. Signs do not simply reflect reality but organise and produce it (Peirce, 1955: 1; Saussure, 1966: 65). As a mode of governance, apartheid is not reducible to its coercive apparatus but is embedded within semiotic structures which organise meaning. The codification of populations and entrenchment of spatial division into the semiotic order exemplify the process of ‘mythologisation’ where ideology is naturalised into “common sense” (Barthes, 1972: 241). Therefore, semiotics reveals how apartheid sought to produce meaning in a manner which legitimised hierarchical domination while concealing the way in which it was constructed.

Resistance to apartheid and indigenous self-determination cannot be understood solely in terms of material struggle but must be seen as a contest over meaning. Discursive practices and symbolic interventions constitute the “encoding and decoding” (Hall, 1997: 18) of struggles where dominant codes are challenged by oppositional interpretations. Semiotic interventions hold the potential to destabilise the apartheid regime but undermining its monopoly over intelligibility. Semiotics, therefore, foregrounds how struggles of self-determination are waged in the symbolic arena where the notions of freedom, identity, and sovereignty are contested and articulated (Wynter, 2003: 304).

It is essential to understand that apartheid must be located within global semiotic regimes and cannot be confined to the boundaries of a single state. The meaning of apartheid has been reinscribed by solidarity discourses and transnational movements within wider struggles of legitimacy, recognition, and sovereignty (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013: 44). Indeed, meaning is never fixed but always deferred [*différance*] (Derrida, 1978: 6) and this conception underscores how the symbolic order of apartheid was challenged by counter-hegemonic discourses circulating across borders. Through a semiotic analysis, the extent to which apartheid drew from and contributed to global structures of signification can be discerned. This reveals its embeddedness within broader discursive and ideological formations.

The framework will provide a means of analysing apartheid as a semiotic phenomenon structuring the possibilities of self-determination. Representation is central, not only to sustaining regimes of domination, but also to emboldening practices of resistance. Therefore, self-determination is not posited as a legal or political claim, but a semiotic struggle over meaning itself, rooted in global structures of signification.

Structure

This paper will begin by examining the theoretical foundations of semiotics. This will be done by defining the concept of semiotics, providing a brief intellectual history, and decoding the jargon which accompanies the concept, looking at the differences between dyadic (Saussurean) and triadic (Peircian) approaches, as well as the difference between the denoted and the connoted. It

will, slowly at first, start to explain what the semiotics of apartheid are, and how this framework will delve into these semiotics. The importance of a multi-level framework will be emphasised, such an exploratory analysis cannot be conducted without one. A brief overview of each of the three interdependent clusters of which the framework is comprised will be provided before explaining each cluster on its own. It will be underscored that none of the clusters can exist without the other. Each one relies on the next to ensure that a methodical and comprehensive analysis can be conducted.

The first cluster is the systematic and seeks to interrogate the structuring principles of semiotic orders. Located on the macro-semiotic plane, this cluster will analyse the institutionalisation of meaning through symbolic regimes and ideological apparatuses. It foregrounds how systems of power reproduce themselves by entrenching signification within normative institutions, cartographic structures, and mythological imaginaries. Instead of appearing as overt acts of domination, these formation rely on sedimented practices, including language, quotidian repetition, and ritual, to naturalise authority. The nation-state itself is the exemplification of a systematic semiotic regime in which signs, such as anthems, borders, and flags, cohere into a naturalised order of sovereignty. The systematic cluster reinforces how symbolic infrastructures operate as conditions for domination and control.

The second cluster is the mimetic and seeks to investigate the semiotics of representation and the politics of resemblance. Interrogating the mechanisms which regimes of power use to assert verisimilitude, this cluster examines the representations which claim to reflect reality by constructing and disciplining it. Mimesis is an active modality of world-making and not a neutral imitation. Caricature, simulation, and stereotype overtly encode relations of domination. Representation is a terrain of struggle within this framework, and the mimetic is both an instrument of colonial domination and a site of counter-hegemonic contestation. The former emerges in the form of propagandistic and realist forms which naturalise hierarchy, and the latter in tactics of subversion and reclaiming the narrative. Emphasising the chasm between appearance and referent, the mimetic cluster creates room for a theorisation as to how signification has the ability to discipline perception and authorise political imaginaries.

The third cluster is the diegetic which theorises the creation and production of meaning through narrative logics and regimes of classification. Diegesis is indicative of the internal organisation of narrative worlds. This cluster emphasises how narratives are able to operate as technologies of power. Narratives can construct worldviews, naturalise discursive codes, and sustain classificatory structures which delegitimise certain subjects while rendering others legible. Apartheid and colonial regimes exemplify these technologies through the use of civilisational myths, juridical labels, and scientific taxonomies, functioning as narrative structures of domination. Resistance, in turn, emerges through counter-diegetic practices, such as alternative storytelling and category refusal, which disrupt imposed taxonomies and re-signify frames of belonging. The diegetic cluster, therefore, situates narrative as a site of epistemic and political struggle. Here, the subject is reconfigured and the possibility of world-making is constituted.

Interdependently, these clusters come together to form a comprehensive semiotic framework which encapsulates the systematic, mimetic, and diegetic dimensions of self-determination in contexts of apartheid. This paper will elaborate upon each of these clusters, demonstrating how they interact and how they will provide the necessary tools to analyse self-determination under apartheid from both a political and a semiotic perspective.

Theoretical Foundations of Semiotics

What is Semiotics?

Brief Intellectual History

A symbol contains within it a multitude of meanings – it is not inert or static, but charged with memory, emotion, and ideology. Symbols connect present generations to their predecessors, elicit emotional reactions, express cultural values, serve as perceptual filters, and shape social identity. Any expression, visual or auditory, can be classified as a symbol, as can one of a linguistic nature, because what is a word if not a symbol to which meaning is assigned? The study of signs predates modern disciplines and can be traced back to Ancient Greece. Plato, Aristotle, and other

philosophers sought to understand the relationships between symbols and the world in which they existed (Deely, 1982: 34).

The philosophy of Plato already contained within it semiotic insights, most notably in his discussion of ‘mimesis’ in the *Republic*. Artistic and linguistic representations, to Plato, were not clear reflections of truth, but imitations which were twice removed from the ‘forms,’ the eternal realities which structure existence (Plato, 1991: 381). It is implied that signs are innately deceptive and lead people away from the truth. Conversely, Aristotle developed a systematic account of signs and symbols across both the *Poetics* and the *Rhetoric*. Language and symbols, to Aristotle, necessitated persuasion and led to catharsis and categorisation. Thus, between Plato and Aristotle marks the shift of signs away from Platonic suspicion and toward a functional and pragmatic role in communication and cognitive processes (Aristotle, 1996: 23).

Augustine sought to centre signs in Christian theology. *De Doctrina Christina* explored the difference between *res* (matter) and *signa* (signs) where the latter pointed toward the divine truth. Language and symbols were no longer mere communicative devices but intertwined with the propagation of sacred knowledge and the exegesis of scripture (Augustine, 2002: 63). Thus, a hermeneutic tradition in which signs were read allegorically was inaugurated, and its practice rooted deeply in medieval scholastic thought.

The modern era played a significant role in the evolution of the philosophy of signs. In *Meditations*, René Descartes questioned the reliability of representation. Insistence upon “clear and distinct ideas” (Descartes, 1996: 24) classified signs as mediators of knowledge. The misrepresentation of signs or reliance on the senses were sources of error. This conception was deepened by John Locke in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, particularly in Book III where it was argued that words are “signs of ideas” and not signs of matter itself (Locke, 1975: 404). Language, for Locke, thus emerged as both necessary and problematic. On one hand, it enabled communication but on the other, it is riddled with ambiguity as the same word represents different ideas for different individuals.

In the Age of Enlightenment, it was Immanuel Kant who revolutionised the debate around signs and representation. *Critique of Pure Reason* argues that human beings only ever encounter *phenomena* (appearances) structured by confines of understanding and mediated by schemata, and never *noumena* (things-in-themselves) (Kant, 1998: 174). Therefore, representation is not secondary to knowledge but constitutive of it. It was discerned that meaning was not passively absorbed from the world but actively produced by structures of cognition. As per the Kantian framework, signs and symbols mediate every possibility of experience, rendering semiotics inseparable from epistemology.

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel furthered this notion, tethering signs to the unfolding Spirit. In *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel theorised that Spirit is externalised in language and symbols which return as self-recognition (Hegel, 1977: 145). Thus, the act of semiosis is dialectical. Language and symbols are not simply tools of communication, but levels in the movement of Spirit toward knowledge of the self. Adapting Hegelian theory but using it to frame materialism, Karl Marx argued that ideology, itself, is semiotic. *The German Ideology* declared that “the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas” (Marx and Engels, 1970: 64). Language and symbols are material practices embedded in class structures. As per the Marxist conception, semiotics is an instruments of domination and signs reproduce the relations of production.

In the nineteenth century, Friedrich Nietzsche produced a radical critique of language. *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense* claimed that all words are metaphors; “illusions we have forgotten are illusions” (Nietzsche, 1999: 146). Instead of reflecting reality, signs impose human categories on a flux which has no innate order. Nietzsche held a suspicion toward language which subsequently destabilised the metaphysical assumptions of earlier semiotic theories. Introducing yet another dimension, Sigmund Freud conceived the unconscious as a semiotic system. *The Interpretation of Dreams* expounded upon how dreams, symptoms, and even slips of the tongue operate semiotically, condense numerous meanings, and necessitate interpretation (Freud, 1997: 134).

The formalisation of semiotics in the twentieth century by Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce saw each theorist drawing upon this extensive philosophical history. Saussure (1916) conceptualised language as a system of symbols, comprised of signifier and signified. His

structuralist ideals paved the way for Roland Barthes (1972) and Jaques Derrida (1981). In a separate but parallel tradition, Peirce (1931-58) laid the groundwork for theorists like Julia Kristeva (1973) and Umberto Eco (1976) as they expanded semiotics in new directions, delving into intertextuality and polysemy, among other semiotic traditions. Thus, semiotics is not a narrow discipline, but the culmination of an inquiry which spanned centuries, looking at how meaning and representation structure human existence.

Non-Western Conceptions

Language and symbols are devoid of inertia. They embody culture, emotion, ideology, and memory. Moreover, language and symbols tether present generations to their ancestors, filter perception, and shape collective identity. Contemporary accounts of semiotics begin with Plato and Aristotle, but it must be noted that this genealogy is partial. The provision of a decolonial history illuminates semiotic traditions from the global South and the subaltern, where sign systems have been theorised outside Western epistemology for centuries.

African traditions are rife with semiotic structures where each motif is filled with cosmological, moral, and political meaning, as seen in the use of language and symbols, such as the *adinkra* by the Akan of Ghana (Rattray, 1927: 265). Language and symbols in African history were not arbitrary, but socially embedded, focusing on ethics, kinship, and resistance. In Southern Africa, rock art was not only representative, but also semiotic, providing an interface with the spiritual realm, pointing toward relationships between humans and their ancestors as well as their connection to animals (Lewis-Williams, 2002: 134). A study of these practices reveal that African semiotics were grounded in ritual and that signs were inseparable from both community and ontology.

Islamic traditions, too, offer rich semiotic thought. Al-Farabi and Ibn Sina theorised language as a system of symbols and it was through this system that metaphysical truths could be understood. Sufi traditions saw signs and scripture as *ayāt* (signs of God) and believed them to be layered with allegory (Nasr, 1964: 87). Qur'anic emphasis on *ayāt* frames the world as a semiotic realm,

a system of signs in need of interpretation. Diametrically opposed to the suspicion of signs held by Pluto and Descartes, Islamic semiotics positioned symbolic mediation as a pathway to truth.

The Sanskrit theory of *dhavani* (suggestion) expressed by Anandavardhana in the *Dhvanyaloka* (ninth century) saw meaning as irreducible to literal denotation. In South Asia, language was riddled with resonance which surpassed direct signification and brought about a proto-structuralist understanding of surplus meaning (Ingalls et al., 1990: 102). This conception oriented aesthetic and affect as key aspects of semiotics, in some way aligning with theories of polysemy which emerged only centuries later.

Indigenous traditions in Latin America engaged with semiotic structures in the form of glyphs, ritual performances, and textiles. For one, the Mayan script was a combination of logographic and syllabic systems which encoded not only speech, but also the cosmological order (Coe and Van Stone, 2005: 56). Postcolonial thinkers highlight how colonialism violently subordinated or erased semiotic systems of the global South, replacing them with alphabetic hegemony (Mignolo, 1995:11). Subaltern semiotic forms, however, persists as counter-hegemonic repositories filled with indigenous knowledge.

Decolonial theory sheds light on how semiotics has been weaponised. Colonial language and the imposition of symbolic orders fractured African self-perception (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 1986: 16) as semiotics were central to cultural domination. The conception of the “coloniality of power” (Quijano, 2000: 552) exposes how the symbolic hierarchies of language, race, and religion entrench material subjugation. Signs are not neutral, but vectors of colonial oppression.

Semiotics must be approached pluriversally, as a dispersed set of practices across centuries of culture and history. Perspectives from the global South demonstrate that meaning is always relational and embedded in both cosmology and struggle. A decolonial conception of semiotics resists the universalisation of Western ideologies and instead, foregrounds the multiplicity of signs which structure human life and the politics of resistance.

Basic Terms

Jargon used within the field of semiotics – or rather, in the field of Semiology – is complicated and fairly layered. Symbols are no longer just symbols, but complex and intricate systems made up of a number of elements. The sign is the most basic unit of meaning within semiotics. It was Ferdinand de Saussure who first formally proposed the notion of the *signifiant* (signifier) and the *signifié* (signified), two elements of which the sign is comprised (1916: 65), giving rise to a dyadic understanding of semiotics. The signifier is the form of the sign, which can be an image, a sound, or a word. On the other hand, the signified is the meaning to which the sign refers. This is not the actual image, sound, or word, but the idea which is associated with it. For example, in the word ‘apartheid,’ the sound or the written letters A-P-A-R-T-H-E-I-D would be the signifier, while the socio-political concepts of discrimination and segregation would be the signified. Therefore, apartheid functions as a sign insofar as it unites the signifier (the material word itself, either sounded out or written down) and the signified (the socio-political concepts of discrimination and segregation). This illustrates the Saussurean point which states that “the sign in the combination of a concept and a sound-image” (Saussure, 1916: 66).

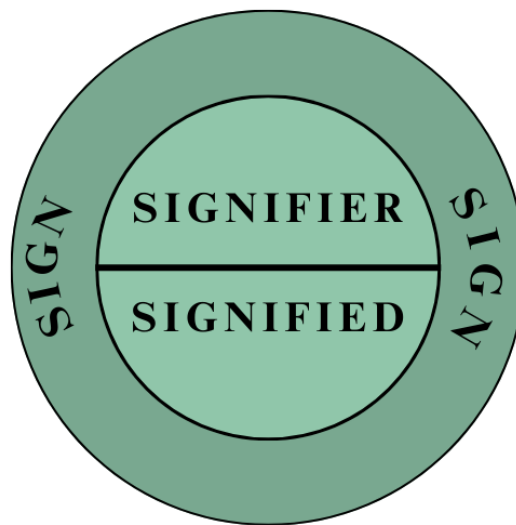


Figure 1. Saussurean Semiotic Diagram

The dyadic model, however, has been critiqued for its simplicity and the fact that it ignores the dynamic processes through which meaning is made. Hence, approaching semiotics from a triadic perspective yields a different understanding of the science as there are now three elements at play instead of two (Peirce, 1931: 228). The *representamen* is the form taken on by the sign.

Essentially, an aberration of the signifier, although broader in definition; it is what stands for something to someone. The *object* is what the representamen refers to, usually a thing or idea which can be both real or abstract. Objects can either be immediate, a representation or dynamic, a tangible thing. The *interpretant* is the understanding as it occurs in the mind of the interpreter, the effect of the sign on their mind (Peirce, 1931: 229). For example, a military checkpoint is a sign. The representamen in this instance is a physical checkpoint manned by armed soldiers, while the object is the reality of belligerent occupation and the potential of resistance to it. The interpretant, ultimately, would be the understanding of the military checkpoint – occupied peoples would make sense of it and reach the conclusion that they are in a zone of conflict, that they are being inspected and surveyed, and that refusal to conform may result in dangerous consequences.

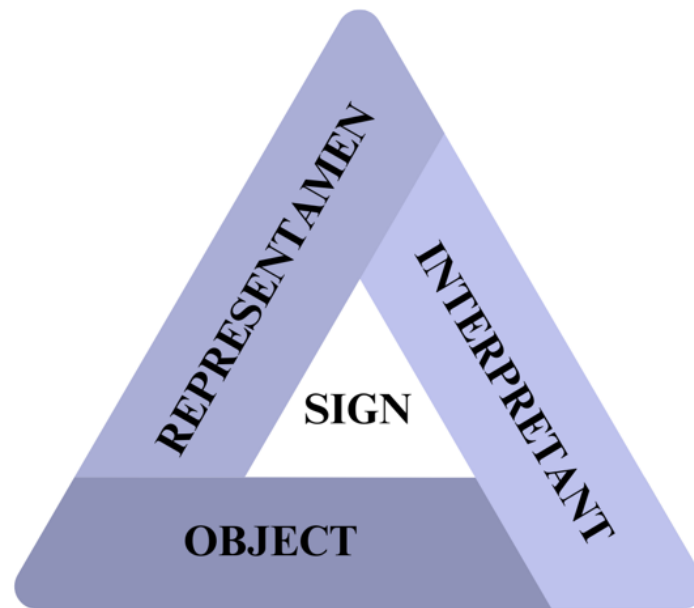


Figure 2. Peircian Semiotic Diagram

Semiotics is the ongoing and ever-unfolding process by which signs produce meaning. Semiosis is “the action of signs” (Sebeok, 2001: 10), and is a process which is never complete but continuously unfolding in various contexts. It can thus be surmised that semiotics is not just the study of language and symbols, but a universal condition of the exchange of signs across multiple domains. Biosemiotics, developed by Sebeok and others, posits that semiosis is not simply confined to human communication. Instead, it constitutes all processes of life. Semiotic systems, even at a cellular level, engage in meaning-making, expanding the scope of the

discipline beyond the linguistics of Saussure and the pragmatism of Peirce (Sebeok, 2001: 19). From this perspective, meaning is never fixed within a sign but emerges between systems and their environments. Semiosis is framed as an adaptive and evolutionary process, demonstrating that the production of meaning is deeply intertwined with the very conditions of life.

Krippendorff situates the discussion within manmade systems by emphasising the contextual nature of meaning and the manner in which it is socially embedded. “Design is making sense (of things)” (Krippendorff, 1989:11) and meaning arises from how signs are located and interpreted within a socio-cultural framework as opposed to its inherent qualities. This highlights that meaning is constructed, that a sign only acquires significance once placed within a nexus of relations which connects it to the lived reality of the interpreter. The design of an artifact, for example, only holds meaning once interpreted through the cultural codes, historical positionings, and political memories of those who encounter it. A contextualist and pragmatic understanding of semiotics is advanced, resonating with interpretive dynamics while addressing the power of discourse in shaping perception.

Sebeok and Krippendorff jointly extend the foundational insights propelled forth by Saussure and Peirce in a complementary manner. Sebeok universalises semiosis as a process innate to all life, a dynamic and evolutionary development. Krippendorff emphasises the socio-cultural element of semiosis, tethering meaning to context and interpretation. Both theorists highlight the fact that semiotics is not comprised of static sign systems but must be understood as a dynamic and ongoing negotiation of meaning across all domains.

Denotation vs. Connotation

Although denotation and connotation are not exclusive to semiology, they play an incredibly important role in the field. In his seminal text, *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes differentiates between the two. Denotation is the first order of signification and the literal, explicit meaning of a sign. It is what a sign represents without any ideological associations (Barthes, 1972: 114). Connotation is the second order of signification. It produces meaning through cultural codes, ideological associations, and social practices (Barthes, 1972: 115).

Denotation can be seen as a neutral description of reality. It is never, however, free of connotative potential (Barthes, 1977: 17) as 'literal' meaning always exists within wider systems of meaning-making. This aligns with Saussurean structural linguistics which emphasised that signs never acquire meaning in isolation but always through relation (Saussure, 1916: 67). Denotation and connotation, therefore, cannot be understood as static components of meaning. In reality, they are interdependent processes within semiosis, continuously negotiating meaning.

Denotation and connotation play an active role in the processes of encoding and decoding within texts (Hall, 1980: 131-132). Within cultural studies, texts are not simply denotative. Instead, audiences interpret texts through connotative lenses shaped by lived experience, class, gender, and race. Connotation, therefore, is not a supplement to denotation, but the arena in which ideological battles are fought. From a critical perspective, it has been argued that denotation and connotation must be located within intertextuality (Kristeva, 1980: 36). Indeed, no sign exists in isolation and all signs are woven into a complex network of meanings. This blurs the lines between the literal and the figurative as both are socially mediated.

In essence, denotation and connotation form the foundation of semiotic analysis, illustrating how signs communicate literally and culturally. The boundary between them, however, is porous, highlighting the fact that even the most neutral of signs are always already ideological.

For example, when looking at the flag of Cyprus, denotationally, it appears to be an outline of the island resting upon two olive branches.



Figure 3. Flag of Cyprus

Upon further inspection using a connotational lens, several elements come to light. The white background represents peace, symbolising the independence, and thus the harmony, gained by Cyprus after having been under the control of many empires and foreign countries for years on end. The outline of the island is copper-coloured, pointing toward the history of copper mining in Cyprus, an industry which once sustained the nation (Buhayer, 2022: 8). Moreover, the entirety of the island appears on the flag, again, illustrating independence and harmony. Lastly, there are two intertwined olive branches on the flag. These could easily be dismissed as being representative of the Cypriot agricultural industry where Mediterranean crops such as olives grow in abundance. This is simplistic as the branches have a more layered meaning. Typically, an olive branch would represent peace and unity (Grego, 2022), but these olive branches in particular represent peace and unity between the two largest, and most divided, ethnic groups on the island; Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots. For years, conflict grew between the two groupings, and still is, but the olive branches point toward peace between the Greeks and Turks of the island. In the years following independence, a relative harmony developed, but was disrupted by Turkish settler colonialism in Northern Cyprus which is still underway today (Jensehaugen, 2017: 354).

The Semiotics of Apartheid

Apartheid was not designed as a once-off occurrence, but a complex melange of political and bureaucratic measures, systems and institutions, as well as language and symbols (Taylor, 2024: 15). All of its tentacles come together to form a monster which is incredibly difficult to dissect, let alone defeat. In an attempt to anatomise the beast, this paper seeks to create a multi-level semiotic framework of analysis which can then be applied to cases of apartheid, both past and present.

Apartheid constitutes a mythological system, from a Barthesian perspective. The ideology of white supremacy and the notion of segregation presents itself as natural through symbols of separation. Public signage and passbooks are not simply informational but mythological, codifying racial domination as common sense. Apartheid is a discourse, from a Foucauldian perspective. It is a regime which produced racialised subjects through disciplinary mechanisms,

institutions, and surveillance (Foucault, 1977: 199). The semiotics of apartheid reveal just how deeply ideology was embedded into material life and how self-determination, both in favour of the system and against it, had a semiotic dimension.

Why a Multi-Level Semiotic Framework?

Limits of Classical Semiotics in Contexts of Apartheid

Classical semiotics draws attention to individual signs but does not account for networks of signs and their systemic interactions. Apartheid cannot be reduced to a single sign. It is a convoluted semiotic regime comprised of an array of discourses, institutions, laws, and symbols. The dyadic model dissects the functioning of signs at the micro-level, while the triadic model exposes interpretative process. Neither of these approaches, however, accounts for macro-level phenomena.

A multi-level framework, therefore, is needed to interpret apartheid and other colonial regimes. This framework must take into account its philosophical predecessors, taking into account Saussurean structuralism and Peircian pragmatism, the myth and ideology of Barthes and Marx, the discourse of Foucault, and the polysemy and intertextuality of Kristeva and Eco. Importantly, it must also take into account semiotics from the subaltern and discourses from the global South. At the intersection of these insights, it can be grasped how apartheid was not just a political regime but a semiotic one which shaped culture, social relations, and subjectivity.

Therefore, this paper proposes a multi-level semiotic framework which builds upon Western and non-Western philosophical legacies and situates itself within the post-structuralist sphere. In so doing, the framework will enable the analysis of apartheid and other systems of colonial regimes, exploring them as semiotic regimes with power wielded not only by laws and violence, but by language and symbols, too.

A Layered Model

Apartheid is not a natural occurrence but one brought about by design. It can be understood as an offshoot of imperialism and colonialism and is classified as a possible culmination of settler colonialism, with the other three being belligerent occupation, assimilation policies, and biological warfare (Legal Information Institute, 2025). Apartheid was conceptualised prior to its implementation in South Africa and emerged as a potent strain of settler colonialism. Apartheid is upheld by colonial suppression and resisted by indigenous resurgence. Both of these are forms of self-determination and have given rise to the convergence of a multitude of occurrences and signs. In order to study such phenomena within a system using a semiotic lens, a layered model must be conceptualised. Indeed, each expression of self-determination, colonial or indigenous, can be categorised into a network of signs. Dissecting each sign independently, however, may result in the production of a polemic perspective. While certain language and symbols can be examined in their entirety using the models of Saussure or Peirce, they are detached from cultural, political, and social contexts. Situating them within these contexts by placing them within a layered model enriches the examination.

This paper proposes a semiotic framework comprised of three clusters: systematic, mimetic, and diegetic. This framework seeks to capture the various ways in which meaning is encoded and decoded in contexts of apartheid through the exercise of self-determination. The tripartite structure of the framework avoids diluting analysis into excessive compartmentalisation while simultaneously holding sufficient nuance allowing for the interrogation of various modes of signification. Each cluster engages with a distinguished but interconnected dimension of semiotic production. The clusters come together to create a robust scaffolding for understanding how self-determination in contexts of apartheid was staged, discursively, visually, and ideologically.

The Systematic Cluster

In order to cement in and codify the supremacy of one race over another, apartheid made use of discourse and language. The systematic realm inspects the institutionalisation and formalisation of language as it structures educational, legal, and political discourse. Language systems shape public consciousness and embed ideological assumptions within administrative documents, making them appear authoritative or neutral. Constitutions, for example, reconfigure indigeneity

in order to legitimise settler sovereignty. Citizenship laws, legal texts, and territorial degrees jointly redefine indigenous presence in subordinated terms or erase it entirely. Educational curricula become instruments of epistemic violence, marginalising indigenous histories. Indigenous cartographies are renamed in the settler tongue. Here, self-determination manifests in the form of colonial suppression. On the other hand, self-determination emerges in the form of indigenous resurgence when political manifestos and resistance charters employ language which asserts alternative sovereign claims.

Within this cluster, emphasis is placed upon the operation of language as a vehicle of both domination and resistance. The bureaucracy of apartheid is a semiotic regime, one which orders life through administrative policies but also through the language of codification, racial hierarchies, and subordination, entrenching colonial suppression as the overarching form of self-determination. Resistance and colonial resurgence, too, reside within the systematic domain as counter-hegemonic discourses and documents emerge to reframe the political imaginary and offer alternative claims to self-determination.

The Mimetic Cluster

Visual representations which aestheticise, dramatise, or mirror social conditions fall into the second cluster. Not only are these imitations of reality, they are able to invoke affective and political responses. The mimetic realm analyses how apartheid regimes employ visual symbols to assert legitimacy and sovereignty. Images are not merely for decoration. They actively naturalise settler supremacy, rooting it in the visual landscape of daily life, and simultaneously uphold the colonial suppression which comes with claims to self-determination. Conversely, indigenous resurgence and self-determination crops up in resistance imagery and constructs a collective identity and memory ingrained in survival and defiance. Photographs of settler violence are not just documentations, but semiotic weapons which seek to challenge hegemonic narratives.

Therefore, the mimetic cluster captures how visibility is not only a mechanism of domination but also an instrument of liberation. The reality of self-determination is encoded and decoded through an array of competing images depicting legitimacy and sovereignty.

The Diegetic Cluster

The diegetic dimension emphasises how power is a narrative tool, and this is underscored in the third cluster. Apartheid cannot be understood without acknowledging the interplay between narrative myths, conceptual classifications, and ideological categories which provide the regime with coherence. The diegetic realm, therefore, inspects how apartheid states were able to narrativise their ventures through myths and metaphors while simultaneously making use of conceptual notions for rationalisation purposes.

Diegetically, settler states portray themselves as ‘civilisers’ or ‘pioneers in order to make their colonial aspirations toward self-determination appear inevitable. They may also invoke Biblical or religious discourse, framing themselves as ‘saviours’ or ‘returning exiles’ in order to legitimise dispossession. Divine providence and racial destiny are easily used by settlers as they are near impossible to disprove and posit segregation as a process which has been divinely ordained. Resistance movements, by contrast, cement their self-determination in counter-narratives and focus on the reclamation of language. Indigenous struggle is framed through metaphors which ignite sentiments of kinship, such as ‘motherland’ and ‘brotherhood,’ among others. Using narrative systems, organised and popular resistance groupings generate emotional solidarity which is rooted in ancestral, political, or spiritual legitimacy. This cluster focuses on the diegetic dimension, foregrounding how narrative myths and conceptual structures are mutually reinforcing and embed apartheid within cognitive horizons but simultaneously provide tools for its contestation.

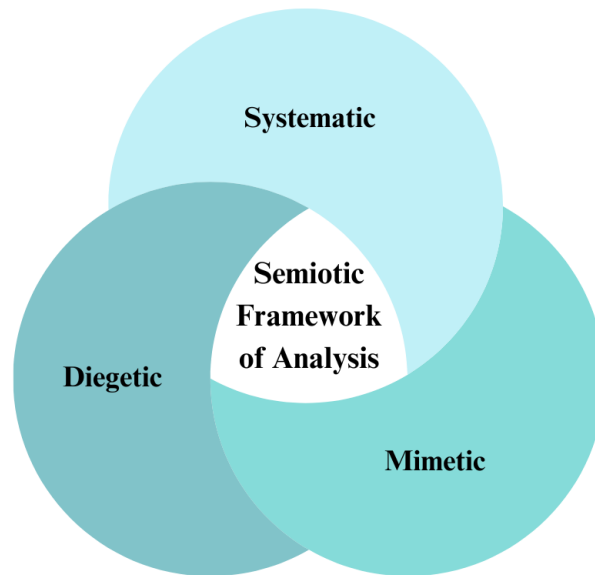


Figure 4. Semiotic Framework of Analysis

Interdependent Operation

Nothing exists in isolation, least of all a semiotic system. Signs derive their intelligibility from differential relations within larger structures, as opposed to their innate properties (Saussure, 1916: 120). Semiotic regimes of apartheid, in particular, are dependent upon the contexts in which they are conceptualised within frameworks of self-determination. Self-determination under apartheid cannot be reduced to legal codes, visual symbols, or narrative myths. Instead, it emerges at the intersection of these registers. In this sense, these clusters are relational and not autonomous, reflecting “dialectical mediation” (Hegel, 1977: 82), where singular moments only gain meaning in relation to others.

The systemic cluster, which analyses racial codification, bureaucratic practice, and spatial cartography, cannot be separated from the mimetic cluster, which materially and visually instantiates those codifications into segregated societies. Neither of the aforementioned clusters can be isolated from the diegetic-analytic cluster, which furnishes the narrative myths and conceptual frameworks which natural domination and rationalise hierarchy. Each cluster plays its own role in the generation of meaning, but their complete actualisation relies on their interdependence. The notion of the ideological state apparatus is instructive in this context (Althusser, 1971: 162). Education, law, and media are not isolated structures, but overlapping

systems in which ideological reproduction takes place in a complicated interplay of systematic, mimetic, and diegetic-analytic practices.

Concrete instances are illustrative of this interdependence. Classifying populations into racial categories was not a juridical act. Instead, it was inscribed mimetically into the racialisation of space, physically demarcated by 'white' and 'non-white' zones (Mbembe, 2001: 25). Discursively, colonial suppression and self-determination were reinforced through diegetic-analytic conceptions racial hierarchy which drew upon pseudo-scientific narratives, theology, and nationalism. Indigenous resurgence and self-determination operated across the same registers. Liberatory narratives were encoded into speeches, manifestos, and secret publications, entering them into the diegetic-analytic realm. Pursuits of equality were embodied mimetically in music, murals, posters, and theatre which sought to subvert the imagery of apartheid and produce counter-narratives which reimagined the very foundations of legitimacy (Napoleon and Freidland, 2016: 728).

Semiotically, this interdependence is rooted in the Peircian insistence that signs operate triadically and are comprised of the representamen, object, and interpretant (Pierce, 1931: 228). Hence, no element is sufficient in itself and is only able to gain coherence through mediation. The semiotic clusters, therefore, are not separate categories but components of a process of semiosis in which self-determination within contexts of apartheid are represented and contested. To fragment these clusters would bring about the metaphysics of presence, where meaning is localised in fixed categories and not perceived as relational (Derrida, 1976: 14). The triadic model able to avoid fragmentation while simultaneously acknowledging the multiplicity the semiotic process, providing a layered examination which foregrounds the systematic, mimetic, and diegetic-analytic facets of self-determination within contexts of apartheid without reifying it into silos.

The relational perspective has both methodological and theoretical stakes. It reflects the establishment of discursive regimes in which institutions and systems form a network as opposed to a linear chain of causation (Foucault, 1977: 49). Apartheid, thus, is a discursive formation in which the systematic, mimetic, and diegetic-analytic realms are mutually exclusive. Similarly,

self-determination under apartheid, whether it be colonial or indigenous, cannot be reduced to a series of individual acts but must be understood within a semiotic order where language and symbols converge to either uphold or subvert the legitimacy of the signification system of apartheid. Drawing dialectical relations between these clusters, the framework encapsulates the sheer complexity of self-determination in contexts of apartheid as a structural, a linguistic, and a symbolic phenomenon as efforts are made to either maintain or dismantle the system.

Systematic: Institutions, Power, and the Architecture of Social Reality

The Systematic Semiotic Plane

Politico-legal analysis alone cannot fully explore struggles for self-determination within contexts of apartheid. Indeed, material conditions and juridical structures shape the contours of domination, but it must be noted that they fail to capture the representational and symbolic frameworks which render inequality intelligible and socially legitimate (Kristeva, 1980: 27). Apartheid cannot be reduced to a system of coercion but must be conceptualised as a system of meaning which regulates access to sovereignty, orders space, and classifies subjects. Systematic semiotics offers a critical lens through which these symbolic orders can be interrogated. On a systematic level, meaning emerges not from signs in silos but from differential relations between signs within broader structural codes (Saussure, 1916: 83; Pierce, 1958: 27). This perspective reveals that struggles over self-determination under regimes of apartheid do not unfold in isolation but within pre-existing symbolic regimes which either enable or constrain action.

Symbolic power is rendered especially effective when naturalised through institutional routines and daily practices. Ritualised behaviours, from public ceremonies and religious observances to clothing, imbue habitus with ideology, making domination appear inevitable and self-evident (Bourdieu, 1977: 94). Performativity demonstrates how identities are constituted through the repeated enactment of normative behaviours as opposed to voluntary mimicry (Butler, 1993: 12). In contexts of apartheid, repetition can constrain autonomy, consolidate hierarchies, and shape subjectivity. Performativity, however, also offers possibilities of resistance, and by altering or resignifying banal practices, communities are able to contest dominant norms and pursue self-determination (Butler, 1993: 12).

The material realm, too, is capable of communicating power. Architecture and spatial planning do more than regulate movement. They demarcate boundaries, discipline bodies, and inscribe hierarchies into space, embedding domination into everyday life (Lefebvre, 1991: 33). Space itself functions as a semiotic system, signalling who belongs and who is excluded. Thus, the reclamation and resignification of space is a critical site for resistance, enabling the dispossessed to reimagine social relations and assert claims to sovereignty. Everyday objects, whether they be identity documents and pass books or treasured items in homes, operate as carriers of ideological power, demonstrating that domination is simultaneously symbolic and structural.

Language and symbols are both mediums of subjugation and terrains of contestation. Discursive practices do not simply reflect reality but actively produce regimes of truth while shaping subjectivity (Foucault, 1972: 49). Individuals and communities are interpellated into domination social orders through language and symbols, transforming them into subjects who accept and do not question existing hierarchies (Althusser, 1971: 174). Under apartheid regimes, bureaucratic language is embedded into colonial hierarchies and renders indigenous claims to sovereignty unintelligible. Alternative discourses, however, resist these processes (Kristeva, 1980: 27), imagining emancipatory futures and challenging the symbolic frameworks which quell struggles for self-determination.

A systematic semiotic approach reveals how the power of apartheid extends beyond laws and policies, seeping into the pervasive but invisible symbolic orders embedded in daily life itself. An analysis of discursive practices, institutional symbolism, ritualised behaviours, spatial arrangements, and structural arrangements allows a semiotic analysis to identify the very mechanisms through which domination is produced and contested. This perspective illustrates that the struggle for self-determination is inseparable from the semiotic contestation of meaning, representation, and space. By rendering the invisible visible, a systematic semiotic analysis situates the symbolic plane as central to the pursuit of self-determination under apartheid.

Structural Codes and Symbolic Regimes

On a systematic level, semiotics seeks to dissect the codes and symbolic regimes which entrench and legitimise domination in contexts of apartheid. By establishing boundaries of intelligibility and legibility, structural codes organise meaning and determine who is recognised and who is excluded. These codes evolve into a semiotic regime which not only regulates social life but places limits on the possibilities of self-determination and sovereignty.

Codes are cultural frameworks which stabilise and unify meaning across institutions (Eco, 1976: 68). In contexts of apartheid, codes emerge in educational curricula, media discourse, and religious beliefs, entrenching a symbolic order which naturalises racial domination. Education, in particular, is not simply a vector of knowledge transmission but an apparatus of epistemic supremacy which silences indigenous modalities and reinscribes colonial systems. The structural code is pedagogical. It decides whether or not knowledge is valid and in so doing, it constricts the political imaginary of indigenous self-determination (Spivak, 1988: 281).

Meaning is produced relationally within systems and not derived from innate properties (Saussure, 1916: 120). This is a key tenet of Saussurean semiotics which sheds light on how apartheid regimes utilise language to produce racialised hierarchies. Terms embedded by these regimes in constitutions and legal texts are not neutral, but components of a linguistic system which codifies hierarchies and effaces indigenous presence. Language, therefore, becomes the site where indigeneity is denied or subordinated. Bureaucratic neutrality is riddled with ideological elements and thus, emblematic of semiotic violence (Kristeva, 1986: 35).

Discourses within contexts of apartheid posit contingent histories as self-evident truths (Barthes, 1972: 142). Administrative documents frame indigeneity in subordinated terms and perform this function seamlessly. They strive to depoliticise colonial claims to sovereignty, framing them as inevitable. Constitutions are not meant to regulate political order but to signify worldviews in which settler supremacy is naturalised. The bureaucratic arm of apartheid is a semiotic system, a network of signs which organises life through institutionalised subjugation and racial hierarchy. Within the boundaries of these very same structures, however, lies the possibility of resistance. As per the polysemy of signs, dominant codes are resisted through oppositional interpretations (Hall, 1980: 136). In contexts of apartheid, political manifestos and counter-hegemonic writings

operate as oppositional codifications. The resignification of the political terrain gives way to the assertion of alternative sovereignties and reframes the political imaginary. What was first inscribed as subjugation or erasure is reclaimed and rearticulated as indigenous resurgence, turning the semiotic arena into a battlefield of competing claims to self-determination.

Within contexts of apartheid, structural codes and symbolic regimes function as contested terrains as opposed to inert frameworks. Domination is reproduced by embedding racial hierarchies into legal and epistemic fabric, yet paradoxically, this is the very space for the emergence of resistance. On this level, semiotics edifies the duality of language, either as a medium of colonial suppression or a vehicle of indigenous resurgence.

Institutions and the Naturalisation of Hierarchy

Institutions are seminal to the reproduction of symbolic orders. Within contexts of apartheid, law is not just a coercive apparatus but a semiotic structure which encodes hierarchy and legitimises authority (Althusser, 1971: 132). Bureaucratic documents, constitutions, and legal texts are signifiers of power, neutralising and rationalising racialised social structures, presenting them as inevitable. Bureaucratic documents and administrative instruments codify racial hierarchies and territories control, imbuing policy frameworks with ideology (Foucault, 1972: 49). Constitutions reconfigure indigeneity in order to delegitimise indigenous claims to sovereignty while reinscribing settler domination as a juridical norm. From this perspective, law is semiotic, and not just regulatory. It naturalises inequality, produces social classifications, and shapes consciousness.

Law, however, is also a site of contestation. Marginalised populations assert counter-legal frameworks in the forms of charters, declarations, and petitions, rearticulating indigenous claims to sovereignty while challenging juridical settler colonial orders. Law therefore, becomes a site of domination as well as a terrain for legal resignification, underscoring the fact that it is both generative and suppressive of self-determination (Althusser, 1971: 132).

Both mainstream and social media function as extensions of institutional semiotics. Media discourse is able to produce and circulate knowledge and in so doing, establishes norms around authority, legitimacy, and sovereignty (Foucault, 1972: 49). Dominant media systems work to naturalise the hierarchies of apartheid by reproducing colonial assumptions using tactics of narrative reconstruction, repetition, and selective visibility. Media texts, however, are polysemic and thus open to interpretation (Hall, 1980: 36). Alternative media can assert counter-narratives which reframe sovereignty and contest hegemonic codifications. This demonstrates how discourse and language are performative acts which constitute authority and provide avenues for resistance.

Law, media, and other communicative apparatuses operate through linguistic and symbolic mechanisms in order to reinforce social hierarchies. These institutions delimit political imaginations and construct subjectivities by determining who can be recognised and whose claims are intelligible. The semiotic reproduction of authority occurs as citizens are interpellated into normative orders, normalising subjugation and internalising hierarchical assumptions (Althusser, 1971: 132).

Religion epitomises the semiotic ambivalence of institutions. Using myth and ritual, religious institutions naturalise notions of sovereignty and racial hierarchies by positioning contingent social orders as eternal truths (Barthes, 1972: 141). Religious practices embed authority in ceremonial repetition, doctrine, and symbols, and in so doing, reinforce domination. Religion, however, is not monolithic. Counter-mythologies, modified rituals, and reinterpretations of doctrine have emerged to assert collective self-determination and indigenous dignity through the contestation of dominant semiotic orders (Kristeva, 1980: 27).

Institutions, therefore, are sites of both legitimacy and abjection, of both presence and absence. They make subjugation appear natural by codifying power and exclusion, but they are polysemic and also provide spaces for contestation where the marginalised can be recognised and represented (Hall, 1980: 36). Semiotic orders, including law, media, and religion, simultaneously suppress and enable. They shape the frameworks within which self-determination can be imagined and realised. Institutions are not passive reflections of power but active producers of

meaning, demonstrating how resistance emerges through the reconfiguration of seemingly immutable symbolic structures (Foucault, 1972: 49)

The Cartographies of Power

Space is a semiotic terrain inscribed with domination and resistance, far from neutral. Apartheid regimes make use of space, using it to actualise and operationalise power through the demarcation of boundaries, mapping of territories, and restriction of mobility, all in order to reconfigure sovereignty. Cartographies of power are both material and symbolic, playing a role in how populations understand their rights and modes of belonging. Spatial arrangements are realms of discipline which produce docile bodies by embedding compliance and normative behaviour into social structures (Foucault, 1977: 148). Segregated areas, boundaries, and checkpoints are codified and controlled phenomena, and ensure that access, movement, and settlement all conform to the ideological imperatives of the apartheid state. Space, therefore, becomes a tool through which power is inscribed into daily life, regulating political and social participation as well as physical mobility.

Within contexts of apartheid, spatial organisation naturalises settler presence while marginalising indigenous experiences through hierarchies of legitimacy. Maps are technologies of power which embed ideology into spatial understanding and produce conceptual and visual orders which legitimise exclusion and subordination (Harley, 1989: 13). In no way are maps neutral representations of geography. Under apartheid, cartographies function as semiotic systems by codifying access to authority, resources, and recognition while simultaneously erasing indigenous sovereignty. These mechanisms allow spatial arrangements to regulate physical territories and mobility but also to shape social imaginaries, delineating who is rendered marginal or invisible and how is considered a rightful inhabitant of space.

Space is a domain of domination as it is socially produced and effectively, subject to colonial inscription (Lefebvre, 1991: 38). Settler colonial cartographies are instruments of dispossession which translate conquest into the language of boundaries and maps. Moreover, the systematic renaming of indigenous geographies, from towns and regions to mountains and rivers, represents a colonial overwriting of meaning, and the erasure of indigenous epistemologies of place through

the imposition of new spatial orders which naturalise settler sovereignty. Acts of naming are not neutral but constituent of symbolic violence, transforming indigenous geographies into territories of the colonial imagination.

Cartographies of power are essential to the maintenance of settler control. They are powerful mechanisms used to delimit the horizons of political belonging, entrench racialised hierarchies, and regulate mobility. The colonial map is rendered as common sense, and the settler renaming of space performs the ideological function of legitimating occupation by positing indigenous absence as inevitable. The exposure of these semiotic processes, however, is a revelation of their fragility. Decolonial counter-cartographies, in the form of the reclamation of ancestral routes, the restoration of indigenous names, and the revival of spatial memory, disrupt the settler order of signs by reasserting the rights of indigenous peoples or narrate, inhabit, and define their geographies in their own ways.

The Systematic as Semiotic Regime

Semiotic regimes are at their height of power when they are invisible, perceived as self-evident, and naturalised into daily life. It is their opacity which grants them their authority as hierarchies and structures of domination are rendered unquestionable when codes and signs are internalised without being questioned (Barthes, 1972: 128). A systematic analysis of semiotics allows for an analysis of these structural orders, focusing not on individual signs only, but the way in which sign systems interact with one another. This reveals how codes, institutions, and mythologies play an active role in the constitution of social reality. Signs and symbols do not passively reflect society but actively embed ideology into educational curricula, legal frameworks, media discourses, and religious practices (Barthes, 1972: 128). All facets of existence, from architecture and language to ritual and performance, serve as vectors of symbolic reproduction, masking the contingency of hegemonic orders while sustaining them (Gramsci, 1971: 324).

In the realm of performativity, discourse operates to produce consent, hierarchy, and subjectivity. Ideology is presented as common sense, rendering it especially effective, persuading subjects to

voluntarily accept domination (Barthes, 1972: 128). Education, law, media, and religion are institutional sites where discourse constitutes both authority and legitimacy by codifying social hierarchies and delineating the confines of intelligibility (Kristeva, 1980: 27). Cultural symbols, language, and slogans do not just reflect reality, they construct it. They interpellate individuals into positions within structures of power and render alternative social arrangements impossible. Discourse is deeply performative and this ensures that domination is reproduced and enacted continuously, stabilising regimes of apartheid by embedding semiotic hierarchies into daily life.

The strength of semiotic regimes, paradoxically, is revealed in moments of crisis and rupture, where the contingency of the naturalised order is exposed (Žižek, 1989: 21). Mass mobilisation, political uprisings, and state-sanctioned violence all disrupt the reproduction of power by exposing codes of segregation, hierarchy, and exclusion. These crises create openings for resistance and the potential resignification of dominant symbols. Cultural practices, in the form of imagery, slogans, and songs, demonstrate how semiotic systems are polysemic and open to appropriation, rearticulation, and subversion (Hall, 1980: 37). This allows indigenous claims to self-determination and sovereignty to echo through the hallways of dominant institutions.

The semiotic regime is not static, but dynamic. It simultaneously entrenches domination and offers the potential for radical reinterpretation. Power, subject positions, and visibility are repeatedly enforced and negotiated within dominant semiotic orders and resistance, through cultural and institutional practices, transfigures the semiotic landscape, mediating the emergence of alternative narratives of self-determination. The conceptualisation of the systematic as a semiotic regime foregrounds the intersection of representation, power, and ideology, allowing for an empirical analysis as to how regimes of apartheid materialise and how they are either maintained or contested. Semiotic governance is both prescriptive and contestable, shaping social realities while remaining vulnerable to subversion (Kristeva, 1980: 27).

Mimetic: Representation, Power, and the Performance of Visuality

The Mimetic Semiotic Plane

The mimetic dimension of semiotics dissects the manner in which representation claims to imitate or mirror reality. Not at all a neutral reflection of the world, mimesis has emerged as a constitutive practices which produces what it professes to reflect. Ingrained in philosophical traditions extending all the way to Plato and Aristotle, mimesis has been ever entangled with questions of illusion and power. For Plato, imitation was innately suspicious as it presented itself as a distortion thrice removed from the ideal 'Forms' (Plato, 1997: 595). For Aristotle, on the other hand, mimesis was a positive occurrence and was actualised as a means of catharsis and education (Aristotle, 1995: 1447). Ancient dialectical tensions continue to shape contemporary debates in semiotics as representation is conceptualised as a productive process which authorises certain realities while obscuring others, as opposed to a passive reflection.

The mimetic cluster draws attention to the politics of resemblance and verisimilitude. By presenting reality 'as it is,' mimetic productions exercise an ideological function of a profound nature. Mimetic forms construct authority, discipline perception, and stabilise meaning. It has been demonstrated that realism is always historically imbued, and does not reflect a universal reality but a situated and culturally-specific worldview (Auerbach, 1953: 13). Technological forms in particular, such as film and photography, evolve the conditions of perception and create new modes of political aestheticisation.

Mimesis is a field of struggle, not a homogenous and natural terrain. Apartheid regimes deploy mimetic strategies as they seek to naturalise domination and do so using ethnographic photography, museum displays, and settler myths. Simultaneously, counter-hegemonic groupings appropriate mimetic forms in order to contest authority and imagine alternative liberatory futures. The mimetic, therefore, becomes an instrument of control and an arena of resistance where competing realities come up against one another. Representation is always more than decoration. It is a mechanism used to legitimise sovereignty and reconfigure collective identity. It is thus situated at the very core of semiotic inquiry and plays a role in shaping how reality is perceived, and also how it is imagined, lived, and remembered.

Theories of mimesis repeatedly question how representation relates to reality. In *Republic*, Plato perceived mimetic art as suspicious and too far removed from the truth, to which only philosophy had access (Plato, 1997: 602). Aristotle, by contrast, saw mimesis as a natural process which gave way to catharises and reflection (Aristotle, 1995: 1448). Thus, the very foundations of theoretical mimesis is riddled with tension and disagreement; ever since its inception, it has fostered varying perspectives, some stating that it is alienating and others postulating that it is fundamental to critical engagement.

Literary representation is both historically and ideologically situated (Auerbach, 1953: 15). A close reading of biblical texts as well as the writings of Homer reveals that realism does not offer a transparent reflection of the world. Instead it aligns perception with social structures and cultural hierarchies. On that token, mimesis is the encoding of ways of seeing and systems of value which are contingent within themselves. Cultural realism, particularly on a mass-scale, reproduces reified appearances (Adorno, 1991) instead of revealing deeper truths, dismissing critique in favour of ideological conformity.

Visuality, Power, and Representation

Colonial and apartheid regimes sustain authority through mimetic strategies, presenting domination as self-evident. Within itself, representation is a practice of power (Said, 1978: 2) which reduces diverse populations to mere stereotypes and paints landscapes as empty, awaiting imperial inscription. Mimesis, within such contexts, is never a neutral reflection but a semiotic production of hierarchy.

Photography is central to mimesis as it purports a technological claim of indexicality, assuming that it is a record of reality. Indexicality, however, fails to take into account how photography functions as tool of colonial domination. Photography must be conceptualised as a political relation as opposed to a neutral record as it shapes power dynamics between the photographer, the subject, and the viewer (Azoulay, 2008: 14).

Colonial and apartheid ethnographic photography exemplifies these power dynamics (Edwards, 1992: 54). Images of indigenous peoples are circulated in exhibitions and scientific journals,

staging colonised bodies within taxonomic conventions, erasing individuality, and creating fixed racialised categories (Pinney, 1997: 42). Containing an air of objectivity, these photographs legitimised pseudo-scientific claims of naturalised domination and hierarchy. Indeed, photography is inseparable from institutional practices (Tagg, 1988: 3) and colonial administrations use it for governance and surveillance, embedding representation within its mechanisms of control.

The mimetic power of photography which allowed it to be used as a tool of authority also rendered it a site of contestation. Images of colonial violence, from violent atrocities to displacement and famine, can be circulated globally as evidence of counter-hegemony, upturning narratives of benevolent empire. These images compel moral response as they visibilise suffering, but may risk aestheticising pain (Sontag, 2003: 19). Photography renders the visible grievable, but also determines what should remain invisible (Butler, 2009: 63). Moreover, photography has the capacity to establish a “civil contract” (Azoulay, 2008: 89) through visibility.

As a paradigmatically mimetic medium, cinema is the intersection of affect, narrative, and visuality as it creates persuasive representations of reality. It finds its power in the “ontology of the photographic image” (Bazin, 1967: 14) as cinema purports reality, rendering it uniquely convincing. Since its inception, cinema has been deployed as propaganda and documentary in projects of state legitimisation. Through newsreels and wartime films, military strength, sovereignty, and unity were depicted as transparent realities, thus naturalising political authority. The Frankfurt School told a cautionary tale of the ideological force of cinema. The culture industry standardises representation and blurs entertainment with ideological reproduction (Adorno and Horkheimer, 2002: 131). The immersive nature of cinema naturalises authority, not through explicit instruction, but through the presentation of hierarchical worlds as self-evident. Indeed, realism never reflects life as neutral but organises perception using historically specific forms (Auerbach, 1953: 492). For one, Soviet Socialist Realism represented workers as living embodiments of socialist teleology, expecting ideological alignment (Clark, 2000: 24). Colonial ethnographic films, for another, staged imperial ventures for metropolitan audiences, framing empire as benevolent and paternalistic.

As with other forms of mimesis, cinema can become a site of resistance. Third cinema consistently rejects the ideological dominance of Hollywood (Guneratne and Shohat, 2003: 12) and adopted realist aesthetics which foregrounded subaltern struggles and mobilised solidarity. Counter-cinema emerged in order to disrupt dominant codes, exposing the constructed realism of cinema (Mulvey, 1975: 6). The very mimetic strategies which disciplined perception were reappropriated in pursuits of liberation.

Cinema dissolves the aura of traditional art forms and in so doing, generates an unprecedented platform for mobilisation (Benjamin, 2007: 229). The mimetic realism which accompanies cinema is profoundly ambivalent. It is a medium used for the consolidation of hegemonic power and also subversion and critique. Mimetic forms like cinema discipline and destabilise perception all at once, presenting the duality of representation as domination and resistance.

Quintessential mimetic institutions, museums stage representations of culture, history, and nature in a manner which appears to mirror reality. They are, however, not neutral repositories but apparatuses of pedagogy which organise finite objects in order to discipline knowledge (Bennett, 1995: 87). Artefacts, reconstructions, and specimens produce mimetic orders encoded into hierarchies of civilisation, producing narratives of cultural value and development.

Within contexts of coloniality and apartheid, looted and stolen objects are displayed as evidence of imperial conquest and superiority. Once they are removed from the contexts and environments, cultural objects are resignified within Western epistemologies and classified as trophies of empire (Clifford, 1988: 215). Within museums, ‘life-like’ scenes of colonised societies were displayed, reducing spatiality and temporality in order to fix them in the “ethnographic present” (Fabian, 1983: 31), denying their coevalness with the colonial metropole. Mimesis functions institutionally and this is exemplified by museums. They have a role in pedagogy and this exposes the discipline of perception by representation. Museums have the authority to articulate mediated visions of culture and history, centralising them in the semiotic reproduction of power.

Affect, Resemblance, and Simulation

Representation is an affective and constitutive force, not a passive reflection. Forms of mimesis are undoubtedly and profoundly emotional. They inscribe memory, evoke responses, and shape understandings of violence and power. Not only are they cognitive instruments, they have the capacity to forge attachments and mobilise affect. Photographs of suffering, for example, require ethical engagement as they show “what really happened” (Sontag, 2003: 19). Images are semiotic weapons used to unsettle hegemony and preserve narratives. An affective force, however, can entrench domination through tentacle such as melodrama, propaganda, and spectacle. Identity is bound to nationhood and political power is transformed into emotional attachment (Anderson, 2006: 91).

Mimesis and memory go hand-in-hand, underscoring the significance of affect. Collective memory, of course, is socially framed and determines what is remembered and what is not. Colonial and apartheid regimes seek to erase indigenous histories while resistance movements strive to keep them alive to preserve struggle. Violence provides an illustration of this. Representations of massacres are not mere documentations but can interpret atrocities as necessity or punishment. Framing determines which lives can be grieved (Butler, 2009: 63). Mimetic forms determine whose suffering counts and counter-mimesis mobilises solidarity and preserves memory for generations.

Resemblance is an important dimension of mimesis. Likeness, as per semiotic theory, is constructed and unnatural (Peirce, 1998: 22). Orientalist (Said, 1978), colonial (Fanon, 1963), and apartheid representations project fantasies as reality, exposing its contingency. Simulations sparks hyperreality, blurring the lines between referent and representation (Baudrillard, 1994). Moreover, even subversions may reinscribe hierarchies, question whether there truly is space for the subaltern to speak within dominant formations (Spivak, 1988).

Simulation extends mimesis beyond imitation and into the production of realities which are not rooted entirely in reality. Simulation “encloses the real in a system of signs” (Baudrillard, 1994: 6) and generates a hyperreal domain where distinction between representation and truth are dissolved. Images do not merely reflect power and violence, but fabricate the conditions under which these are experienced and recognised. The simulated is transformed into an operative reality, becoming a politics of perception capable of governing belief and emotion. Algorithms,

digital media, and propaganda amplify the collapse of reference, circulating symbols independently of material referents but still imbuing them with truth. This cannot be reduced to a distortion but must be conceptualised as the reordering of the sensible with the mimetic process producing new ontologies of visibility. Simulation radicalises mimesis, weaponising appearance but also opening up avenues for subversion.

Once again, the politics of mimesis lie in its ambivalence. By triggering affect and constructing realities, it remains a terrain of both domination and contestation.

Counter-Mimesis and Subversion

Mimetic strategies are used to naturalise domination by colonial and state apparatuses. On the other side of the coin, resistance movements can use mimesis in an attempt to subvert these narratives. Counter-mimesis emerges in the form of the appropriation and resignification of dominant forms of representation. It exposes their contradictions, projects counter-imaginaries, and undermines their authority.

Posters are a central medium of counter-mimesis. Revolutionary anti-apartheid posters make use of mimicry (Chérout, 2012: 45), parodying colours, figures, and slogans of state propaganda and directing them toward the imagining of emancipatory futures. Parody is repetition with critical distance (Hutcheon, 1985: 7) and a technique which makes counter-mimesis legible while simultaneously undermining colonial ideological authority.

Photography is an instrument of counter-mimesis. Photographs can document violence and circulate this as evidence to contest official denial. Indexicality grants credibility to the medium, resulting in mimetic fidelity evolving into a weapon of resistance. Images establish a “civil contract of photography” (Azoulay, 2008: 119) and interpellates viewers into the political. Photographs of atrocities and violence can generate “postmemories” (Hirsch, 2012: 23), allowing for counter-hegemonic memory to span generations.

Counter-mimesis turns into collective world-making in the realm of cinema. Third cinema resignifies realist aesthetics, mobilises identity and solidarity, and shows how mimesis has a hand in exposing domination. Realist conventions are appropriated and used to foreground struggle and oppression, shifting away from overarching hegemonic narratives (Guneratne and Shohat, 2003: 19).

Mimicry is an instructive theorisation in this context. Colonised and marginalised populations reproduce forms of authority which are “almost the same, but not quite” (Bhabha, 1994: 85). This reproduction unsettles power and exposes its reliance on imitation. Counter-mimesis operates in a parallel fashion. It repeats dominant codes while revealing their contingency. Myth is a depoliticising force which naturalises ideology (Barthes, 1972) and counter-mimesis repoliticises these ideologies, visibilising codes and rendering them contestable.

Mimesis cannot be reduced to domination. Counter-mimesis positions representation as a terrain of struggle upon which the forms which authorise domination can be inverted to resist it. The appropriation and resignification of mimetic codes provides resistance with the technology they need to expose power as a constructed phenomenon and reclaim the authority of signification. Thus, mimesis is a modality of domination but also a modality of contestation.

The Mimetic as Semiotic Regime

Representation is a semiotic battlefield at the intersection of perception, power, and reality. Plato and Aristotle conceived mimesis from different perspectives and thus, paved the way for theorists such as Auerbach, Benjamin, Said, and Bhabha, among others, all of whom saw mimesis as an active modality of world-making. Claims of reflection on the part of mimesis are never innocent. They are ideologically saturated and able to shape the imaginable, memorable, and visible.

Colonial and apartheid regimes instrumentalise mimetic forms, naturalising domination and rendering hierarchy as self-evident. Representation transforms history into nature and produces myths of civilisation, development, and racial difference. Representation, however, also serves as

an instrument of resistance. Photography becomes testimony, cinema becomes a depiction of liberation, counter-exhibitions become critiques of museological authority, and posters become tools of liberation. Mimesis functions jointly as an apparatus of control and a device of contestation.

The affective nature of mimesis underscores its ambivalence. Not only does it organise cognition; it also brings about attachment, outrage, and solidarity. Mimetic forms inscribe memory and shape effect, sustaining hegemonic narratives while generating counter-memories of resistance. In the contemporary era, representation ceases to mirror reality and has come to produce hyperrealities which legitimise new modalities of power.

Mimesis cannot be reduced to imitation. Mimesis is a political technology, constitutive of world-making and able to discipline perception while also offering tools for disruption. Both the instrument and the battlefield, mimesis illustrates that struggle over representation is inseparable from the struggle over reality itself, ringing especially true when looking at quests for self-determination within contexts of apartheid.

Ultimately, the mimetic is inseparable from the epistemic. Representation is the regulation of perception and defines the boundaries of the visible. Under colonial and apartheid regimes, mimesis produces orders which ideology assumes truth, but within the same field, counter-mimesis comes to the fore in artistic and cultural practices which expose the seams of the real. The semiotic struggle unfolds over ontology itself and is not reserved to meaning, and determines what can exist, what can be imagined, and what can be remembered. Mimesis is dialectically integral to both apartheid and resistance, as it allows for the continual remaking of worlds, oscillating between domination and decolonisation.

Diegetic: Narrative, Power, and the Reconfiguration of Meaning

The Diegetic Semiotic Plane

The diegetic plane is concerned with the semiotics of diegesis, with narrative world-making. The diegetic refers to the internal ordering of stories and the worldviews they give rise to (Bakhtin, 1981: 259). Apartheid functions as a diegetic system. Over and above material coercion, it depends upon the narration of myths and the politico-legal project of rendering, making both appear natural and inevitable.

Apartheid regimes propel forth narratives which position white settlers as civilisers, pioneers, and actors chosen by the divine, rooting their arguments in frontier myths and biblical tropes (Dubow, 1995: 19). Diegetic framings legitimise dispossession and oppression as they situate these within broader narratives of development and destiny, delegitimising indigenous pursuits of self-determination. Laws which reduce complex and diverse identities to rigid racial categories and institutionalise hierarchy through bureaucracy and classification inscribe apartheid and domination (Posel, 2001: 53). Therefore, the authority of the apartheid state is derived from its ability to narrativise belonging.

Indigenous struggles for self-determination emerge in order to contest the diegetic structures of apartheid regimes. Resistance movements seek to dismantle the myths of apartheid by producing counter-diegeses grounded in solidarity and kinship, reframing the 'native' as the 'revolutionary subject' (Ngũgĩ, 1986: 109) through techniques of protest theatre and oral tradition. The rejection of codifications imposed by apartheid regimes becomes a political act as marginalised populations assert themselves using their own language and systems of classification, shifting away from labels like 'terrorist' and toward labels like 'freedom fighter.'

Narratives are incredibly powerful semiotic forms which play a significant role in legitimising domination, structuring political orders, and fostering resistance. The organisation of a story, imbuing it with narrative coherence by giving it a beginning, a middle, and an end, produces meaning and persuades audiences (Aristotle, 1996: 13). Within contexts of apartheid, dominant regimes create diegetic worlds which portray settlers as pioneers or divinely chosen actors. Stories from these worlds create an air of historical inevitability which rationalises dispossession and segregation, framing them as necessary steps in the pursuit of progress.

Narratives are not uncontested phenomena. Heteroglossia and dialogism are concepts which state that all narratives exist within a dialogic field of competing perspectives (Bakhtin, 1981: 272). In apartheid contexts, indigenous and resistance movements cultivate counter-diegesis through oral traditions, protest theatre, and underground literature. The creation of these alternative worlds reframed struggle, positing it not as the preservation of 'civilisation' but as an emancipatory project in the pursuit of self-determination. Hence, narrative serves as a site of epistemic struggle, one which shapes political imagination and envisions possibilities for world-making beyond systems of apartheid.

Frames are organising principles which structure perception and experience (Goffman, 1974: 21). Frames choose limited aspects of reality and underscores them in a manner which attributes causality, defines issues, and legitimises certain courses of action (Entman, 1993: 52). Systems of apartheid depend heavily upon framing devices' repression becomes 'security,' segregation becomes 'development,' and struggles for liberation become 'extremism' and 'terrorism.' Frames of this nature allows regimes to depict domination as stability and quell any quests for self-determination.

Diegetic dimensions demonstrate that quests for self-determination within contexts of apartheid cannot be read as a solely material struggle. Movements seeking legitimacy and sovereignty are also fighting a semiotic battle, as one side seeks to legitimise domination while the other strives to enable liberation.

The Construction of Narrative

Systems of apartheid rely heavily upon the production of narrative worlds which present brutal domination as natural and divinely sanctioned. Deployed diegetic constructions make use of civilisational myths which frame colonisers as explorers, pioneers, and saviours. These narratives draw authority from the logic of manifested and providential destiny, presenting violent conquest and segregation as unavoidable processes in historical development. The notion of myth as the transcendence of history into nature is instructive in this context (Barthes, 1972: 129). Civilisational myths disguise the contingent violence of dispossession and oppression, framing it

as a natural order of progress. Positioning settlers as bastions of enlightenment and modernity allowed for the maintenance of semiotic coherence. Concurrently, indigenous populations were situated as incomplete subjects who were inherently anachronistic. The diegetic coherence embedded into these myths forecloses the possibility of indigenous self-determination while sustaining regimes of exclusion indefinitely.

Euphemistic framings are integral to these categories. Widespread displacement was narratively masked as ‘relocation,’ and systemic exclusion was disguised as ‘development’ and ‘modernisation.’ It must be remembered that meaning is always produced within systems of *différance* (Derrida, 1976: 279). Substitutions and slippages within language itself allows systems of domination to conceal their violence. The weaponisation of concepts such as democracy and modernity allows apartheid regimes to present themselves as embodiments of universal values. This essentially obscures the material realities of dispossession and oppression. Reinforced by practices of erasure and silence, diegetic systems became even more powerful. Settler states articulate founding myths which omit or marginalise indigenous presence, producing the “silencing of the past” (Trouillot, 1995: 48). Far from accidental, these silences are overt semiotic strategies which produce absence as a condition of a political nature.

Archival practices are seminal to analytic erasure. Archives cannot be reduced to repositories of documents but must be conceptualised as a system which governs what must be remembered and what must be forgotten (Foucault, 1972: 129). Within contexts of apartheid, archives function as technologies of exclusion, structuring knowledge in a manner which legitimises exclusion and relegates indigenous claims to the margins or erases them completely. These practices delegitimise indigenous self-determination as they eliminate the semiotic presence of alternative narratives and consolidate the absolute authority of colonial power.

Diegesis is comprised of a semiotic structure which is used to naturalise domination, as myths and narratives justify colonial violence. Indigenous struggles for self-determination require the dismantling of this semiotic order and the creation of counter-semiotic practices which reinscribe presence, renarrate collective emancipatory futures, and reclaim historical portrayals.

Myth is a semiotic system which translates history into nature and portrays social constructions as unquestionable truths (Barthes, 1972: 142). Within contexts of apartheid, myth does not simply embellish narratives. It is a form of political technology which depicts domination as common sense. Civilisation myths and notions of manifested and providential destiny secured a sense of legitimacy as they embedded inequality into an ostensibly natural order.

The very semiotic logic which enables depoliticisation on the part of myth renders it a site of contestation. Myths are inverted or dismantled through the production of counter-narratives which seek to restore their historicity. Counter-myths rooted in emancipation and peoplehood reinscribe political agency and position the collective quest for self-determination as inevitable. In this way, struggles for sovereignty are advanced on the front of material mobilisation and on the front of semiotic reclamation as resistance movements seek to narrate myths which will anchor legitimate and emancipatory futures (Barthes, 1972: 147).

Within the diegetic is the shaping of interpretive schemata through which political realities are apprehended. It is here where experiences are structures and principles are organised (Goffman, 1974: 21) and it is here where selective emphasis legitimises certain claims while casting others by the wayside (Entman, 1993: 52). Under apartheid, it is here where it is determined who is and who is not a political subject, and which forms of struggle are recognised as legitimate and which are not.

Resistance and Counter-Narratives

Just as domination depends upon the production of coherent diegeses, so does resistance depend upon the creation of counter-narratives. A look into narrative semiotics reveals that stories actively structure social imaginaries and do not merely reflect reality. The coherence of plot is a vital mechanism for the generation of meaning (Aristotle, 1987: 11) and this is appropriated by colonial narratives as they seek to sustain legitimacy. The concepts of heteroglossia and dialogism imply that narrative worlds never operate as closed systems but remain open to polyphonic revoicing and contestation (Bakhtin, 1981: 272). Thus, counter-diegetic storytelling emerges as an act of epistemological resistance which introduces alternative frames which unsettle the colonial myth of destiny.

Narrative counter-worlds draw upon indigenous modalities, embodied practice, and oral tradition which seek to recentre suppressed cosmologies. These behaviours resonate with the assertion that cultural representation is implicated in struggles over meaning (Hall, 1997: 33). Kinship metaphors, such as those of ‘motherland’ and ‘brotherhood,’ function semiotically as they construct affective solidarities which transcend imposed divisions. The mobilisation of ancestral and familial metaphors within resistance narratives carves out symbolic spaces of belonging which reinscribe collective subjectivity against imposed erasure propelled forth by colonial diegesis.

A crucial strategy is the inversion of colonial discourse itself. This entails the appropriation of hegemonic myths and categories in an attempt to turn them against their producers. The notion of myth as depoliticised speech (Barnes, 1972: 142) underscores how myths play an active role in obscuring historical violence under the guise of naturalisation. In processes such as these, discursive inversion intervenes and exposes the fact that myths are constructed phenomena and that their elements can be resignified and used to delegitimise colonial authority.

Irony, parody, and satire, coupled with radical reinterpretation, function as semiotic tools for inversion. The carnivalesque mode illustrates how such techniques can undermine the ‘serious’ voice of authority by creating a dialogic space within which dominant codes can be destabilised (Bakhtin, 1984: 122). It can also be argued that discursive struggles hinge upon the capacity to redefine the nodal points around which hegemonic formations are organised (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 112). Revolutionary epistemology, therefore, emerges as a counter-legitimation device which recodes the categories of democracy and modernity weaponised by apartheid regimes.

The resignification wielded by counter-diegesis reframes struggles for self-determination as the enactment of a semiotic praxis. This praxis disrupts and overturns the coherence of colonial diegetic structures and lays bare the possibility of alternative and emancipatory worlds. The production of counter-semiotic orders illustrates that resistance is not reactive but constitutive as it lays the groundwork for post-apartheid futures.

Crisis, Rupture, and Reworlding

Semiotic regimes depend on continuity but it must be noted that their authority is never absolute. Cultures exist as “semiospheres” (Lotman, 1990: 123) and their borders are marked by instability and room for transformation. Crises emerge as moments where the semiosphere is rendered porous, exposing the fragility of seemingly immutable narrative orders. These ruptures disrupt the smooth circulation of symbolic orders and reveal that what was presented as natural is, in reality, carefully constructed.

A close look at narrative identity as a concept underscores how crises are able to invert the coherence of collective self-understanding, giving rise to a renegotiation of symbolic frameworks (Ricoeur, 1984: 74). Similarly, Systems Theory conceptualises crises as moments of communicative overload. In such instances, established codes are incapable of processing events (Luhmann, 1995: 67). It can thus be surmised that narrative crises are not limited to collapse but are moments in which the narrow parameters of signification are revealed, creating spaces for the emergence of new semiotic configurations.

Rupture is necessary to generate conditions for counter-worlding and the eradication of dominant diegeses is needed to create new symbolic universes. “Worlds and knowledges otherwise” (Escobar, 2018: 16), as a concept, illustrates how narratives are capable of enacting forms of existence which have not been captured by hegemonic systems of meaning-making. Counter-worlding, therefore, is the semiotic process through which reality is recoded. It does not only produce resistance, but paves the way for the reimagining of cultural and political horizons. The notion of deterritorialisation (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 508) further sheds light on this process. Ruptures invert dominant codes, allowing for the reconfiguration and reassembling of flows of meaning. The semiotic nature of aesthetic practices, collective rituals, and manifestos, among others, constitutes a variant of deterritorialisation as they relocate meaning from the hegemonic order to emergent constellations of symbolism. The idea of the “distribution of the sensible” (Rancière, 2004: 13) reinforces this relocation of meaning, illustrating how counter-worlding alters what can be imagined, said, and seen, and in so doing, expands the terrain of self-determination.

At the very core of the reworlding lies the transformation of subjectivity. The subject is never fixed in its entirety but always “in process” (Kristeva, 1984: 23) and constituted through processes of signification. Rupture can destabilise and even invert the position imposed upon the subject within hegemonic classification. This essentially enables a shift from passive object of governance to active political agent of world-making.

The reworlding process resonates with the idea of the “imaginary institution of society” (Castoriadis, 1987: 145), wherein which collective autonomy emerges when social existence is redefined by the creation of new significations. Within this realm, the subject is transformed into a revolutionary figure, not because entry was demanded into existing structures but because new symbolic imaginaries were generated. Self-determination, therefore, can be understood as an existential act of reworlding. It is a semiotic revolution which not only reconstitutes the subject, but the entire symbolic universe in which they find themselves.

The Diegetic as Semiotic Regime

When perceived semiotically, it becomes clear that apartheid functioned and continues to function as a diegetic order. The endurance of the system rests upon narrative as myth which naturalises domination. Diegetic myths provide coherent stories of civilisation, destiny, and providence, rendering them legal, and scientific. In this manner, apartheid was not only reproduced through force but through the symbolic labour of the diegetic.

Resistance exposes the fragility and instability of this order. Struggles for self-determination are, indeed, diegetic. In the narrative realm, counter-storytelling disrupted and inverted the diegetic coherence purported by apartheid regimes and in so doing, produce alternative horizons of collective identity. Within contexts of apartheid, renaming and reframing are not marginal actions, but ones which are central to dismantling the symbolic architecture of oppression.

Fanonian insights undoubtedly shed light on this process. Colonial categories are implemented in order to strip the subject of agency and reduce them to nothing more than an object of discourse

(Fanon, 1967: 109). Liberation cannot be reduced to institutional change. Instead, it requires that the subject be reconstituted in their entirety as the creator a new symbolic world (Fanon, 1963: 2). Self-determination is inseparable from semiotic struggle. The myths which sustain domination must be unmasked, allowing for the production of new possibilities of collective existence.

Self-determination is jointly epistemic and political. One must not only seize sovereignty in order to determine their future, but seize meaning too. In so doing, one can narrate the self as well as the community outside of frames imposed by dominating and oppressive powers. The diegetic cluster, working in tandem with the systematic and mimetic clusters, demonstrates how power operates. In order to wield control, myths must be naturalised. On the other side of the coin, however, liberation emerges by contesting this naturalisation.

Therefore, the diegetic cluster depicts narrative as a technology of power, but also as a technology of resistance. Apartheid inscribes itself through myth and cannot simply be relegated to the realms of the juridical and institutional. Resistance emerges as an epistemic struggle over who holds the power of narration and whose futures can be imagined or reimaged. This cluster provides a framework for analysing both domination and liberation within the narrative sphere. Self-determination, it can be concluded, is an act of reworlding, one in which the colonised subject emerges as the creation of new symbolic universes and collective horizons, shedding imposed myths and narratives.

Conclusion: Applying the Semiotic Framework

The Three Clusters and Their Interrelation

The semiotic framework outlined in this paper is comprised of three interdependent clusters: the systematic, the mimetic, and the diegetic. Each of these clusters works in tandem with the other, illuminating different registers of signification. Intersectionally, they create a comprehensive approach which can be used to analyse apartheid and other systems of settler colonial domination as semiotic orders, not merely as political systems.

The systematic cluster is located on the macro-semiotic plane. It examines the manner in which apartheid regimes sediment themselves into ideological apparatuses, institutions, and spatial arrangements, positioning these as structuring principles which underpin symbolic regimes. Within contexts of apartheid, racial hierarchies are encoded into infrastructure, appearing in the flag which naturalises sovereignty, in the anthem which ritualises belonging, and in the cartographic divisions which inscribe division into the fabric of space itself. The systematic cluster sheds light on how domination naturalises itself through institutionalisation, repetition, and ritual, masquerading signification as self-evident instead of constructed.

The mimetic cluster delves into the semiotics of resemblance and representation. It interrogates how oppressive regimes deploy representations which they claim reflects reality but really, is a construction of it. In this case, mimesis is not a neutral imitation but an active modality of world-making. Caricatures, propaganda, and stereotypes all reveal that resemblance and simulation are cornerstones of racial domination and render it intelligible and legitimate. Mimetic practices, at the same time, are sites of resistance. Counter-hegemonic mimesis comes in many forms and inverts colonial claims to verisimilitude, revealing its constructedness. Thus, domination and resistance are simultaneously inscribed on the mimetic terrain.

The diegetic cluster provides an analysis of narrative logics. It illustrates how myths structure not only subjectivities, but entire worlds. Apartheid did not only rely on legal and political systems for sustenance. Diegetic technologies assisted in upholding the system, emerging in the forms of civilisational myths, racialised categories, and scientific taxonomies, all of which naturalised hierarchy. Conversely, resistance emerged in counter-diegetic practices in the form of alternative storytelling and resignifications of belonging. The diegetic cluster underscores the epistemic dimensions of domination and the role of narrative in constructing political realities.

Together, these three clusters offer a multi-layered analysis. The first cluster outlines macro-semiosis, the second cluster reveals contestations around mimesis, and the third cluster illuminates the narrative and classificatory dimensions of power. None of these can be studied in isolation. Apartheid, and by that logic, settler colonialism, operates in the intersection of these registers by systematically institutionalising segregation, mimetically legitimising domination,

and diegetically embedding hierarchy in myths. Similarly, resistance occurs across all aforementioned registers, systematically resignifying sovereignty, mimetically subverting representation, and diegetically rewriting narratives. Therefore, the semiotic framework puts forth a holistic lens through which domination and self-determination can be interrogated within the symbolic realm.

Methodological Usefulness and Adaptability

The usefulness of this framework can be found in its adaptability. As a discipline, semiotics tends to be dismissed as abstract but by integrating it with International Relations, it can be demonstrated that semiotic analysis is not only relevant, but essential, to understanding how political orders of domination are naturalised and resisted. Jointly, all three clusters create a toolkit which can be used to decode how meaning is organised, reproduced, and contested across contexts of apartheid and settler colonialism.

This framework resists the temptation to universalise. Instead, it necessitates contextual specificity but also provides adaptable conceptual tools. In apartheid South Africa, the framework can reveal how Bantustans, pass laws, and racial categories were semiotic phenomena. On the same note, in occupied Palestine, the framework can be used to illuminate how checkpoints, propaganda, and religious myths are semiotic technologies of domination. The adaptability stems from the acknowledgement that while material manifestations of oppression may differ, they are invariably maintained by symbolic infrastructures.

Methodologically, an attempt is made to bridge disciplinary divides. International Relations traditionally focuses on state sovereignty and wars while semiotics is used to interpret cultural texts. The framework fuses these perspective and posits that sovereignty itself is a sign, that borders are semiotic in nature, and that in order for domination to sustain itself, it must have control over meaning. Methodological hybridity allows this framework to relevantly analyse contexts of apartheid as well as other colonial and postcolonial orders.

The framework is reflexive in the sense that it acknowledges that meaning is always contested and deferred, never fixed (Derrida, 1978). This recognition prevents a static analysis which treats signs as transparent reflections of reality. Instead, it highlights the importance of encoding, decoding, and resignification within contexts of dynamic struggles. Therefore, the framework is attuned not only to the fragility of symbolic orders in the face of counter-hegemonic practices but also to their endurance and resilience.

Ethical Considerations and Positionality

A semiotic analysis of apartheid must be attentive to ethical considerations and positionality. Signs are not neutral descriptors and their interpretation is politically subjective. An analysis of the semiotics of apartheid requires one to engage with the violence encoded within them. To study the representation of the marginalised is to risk reproducing the very categories which render them oppressed and illegible. Methodological reflexivity, therefore, is crucial.

Researchers cannot bracket off their positionalities. A commitment to ensuring that the subaltern can speak and the integration of postcolonial theories necessitates an awareness of the epistemic violence inherent in knowledge production. Semiotics cannot be reduced to an analytic tool but must be conceptualised as a terrain of struggle which legitimises certain symbols and silences others. To write about apartheid is to participate in the politics of violence and signification and this undoubtedly carries ethical weight.

Ethical consideration must also be extended to the risk of abstraction. A semiotic analysis could risk detaching symbols from the material conditions of violence. The sign nailed to a segregated bench, for one, is not merely a signifier but an instrument of exclusion. A checkpoint, for another, is not merely a symbolic barrier but a material site of domination. The framework, therefore, is grounded in a dialectical approach which posits that the semiotic and the material must be jointly analysed in order to avoid reproducing the very disjuncture that the framework aims to overcome.

Ethical responsibility also entails acknowledgement of counter-signification. A focus on colonial semiotics risks placing the signs of the oppressor at the forefront and relegating symbols of resistance to the margins. This paper, entitled *Decoding Power*, insists on foregrounding resistance and alternative narratives. To attend only to domination is to reproduce its hegemony. To attend to resistance is to honour the semiotic defiance of oppressed peoples and to situate self-determination as a symbolic struggle.

Invitation to Radical Rereading and Refusal of Dominant Systems

The semiotic framework of analysis is not simply an academic exercise but an invitation to engage in radical rereading; to decode the signs which naturalise domination and refuse the categories which sustain it. Apartheid encodes racial hierarchy into the fabric of everyday life but resistance imbues it with liberation.

This invitation extends beyond the cases of South Africa and Palestine. Around the world, political orders are upheld by semiotic systems which render domination natural. Nation-states rely on systematic, mimetic, and diegetic phenomena to maintain control. Global hierarchies are encoded within discourses and racial orders are sustained by classificatory regimes. To engage in radical rereading is to reveal that signs are constructed, not natural or self-evident.

Refusal is both generative and deconstructive. Beyond exposing domination, counter-semiotics creates alternative meanings and symbols. It is through these practices of counter-signification that the possibility of new horizons emerge. Semiotics, ultimately, is not only a method of critique but a concept which presents a universe of possibility. Self-determination is not merely a legal right but a semiotic struggle over meaning itself.

The semiotic framework developed over the duration of this paper provides a comprehensive methodology which can be used to analyse both domination and resistance as symbolic phenomena. The framework sits at the intersection of Semiology and International Relations, examines symbolic and material registers, and emphasises the ethical stakes of interpretation. Apartheid cannot be understood in its entirety without taking into account its semiotic dimension and resistance cannot be conceptualised holistically until it is also seen as a struggle over

meaning. Above all, this paper invites readers to radically reread struggles for self-determination within contexts of apartheid and refuse dominant semiotic systems in the aims of creating alternative symbolic orders.

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