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ENG 249: Signs & Crossroads: Semiotics (SunHee Gertz)

The Barthian Signification of Mutual Dependence in Han Solo

by Michael Rizzo

Lucas subjects Han Solo to the most drastic change in role of any of the six main characters, to communicate each individual's mutual dependence upon the others for survival. While Han attempts to lead with self-centered flair, at the scene's conclusion, he is aware, if displeased, with his need to rely upon others. In the Trash Compactor scene, Han's leadership of the rescue party is taken over by Leia, the rescuer, upon whom Han then becomes dependent. Though Leia is the one rescued, she in a sense rescues the Han and the others from the defensive position in which they arrive after releasing her, since the group have made no escape plan.

The use of Barthes' model of mythic signification will be helpful in detailing how Lucas uses the evolution of Han's role to convey the message that members of the rescue group are mutually dependent. The Barthian model is built upon the Saussurian dyad of the signifier and signified. Lucas uses visual signifiers to communicate Han the signified as a sign, or form, to the viewer. He is costumed in a stormtrooper uniform, originally to evade actual stormtroopers and DeathStar commanders, but at this point in the scene, he is without helmet, and appears to be wearing the uniform more because he has not had a chance to take it off than because it is serving some purpose.

Though Han uses the uniform as a disguise, he makes no attempt to portray himself as a Stormtrooper. Where he might have feigned obeisance to orders, Han acts in "solo" fashion, answering only to his own wants and needs, indifferent to the influence of authority. Han is apparently so resolutely individual, even within the uniform,

he cannot be de-humanized. In all other instances of the stormtrooper uniform in the film, with the exception of Luke, the uniform dehumanizes its wearer, making him a mere mechanical entity, incidentally human, of the DeathStar machine, defined more by function than any personal characteristic. The wearer becomes relevant solely as a number, since the role played by any particular trooper is interchangeable with any other troopers. The uniform is a sign of the DeathStar, the symbol of the system.

The fact that Han wears no helmet is essential in the maintenance of his identity, especially because his, more than any other character's, is presented as solitary and distinct. Though Han wears the uniform of the Stormtrooper, the visibility of his face conveys the vitality of the Jedi rebellion, that it may survive within the confines of the Empire. In parallel fashion, his body works within the Stormtrooper uniform like he and the rescue group work within the domain of the DeathStar, in both cases surrounded by the technology hostile to any rendering of humanity.

In physique, Han is tall and handsome, much what the viewer expects of a hero. He is confident, brash, and at times, effective, though commonly through chance action. For example, in the trash compactor, when Han fires his gun out of frustration at where they have arrived, causing a ricochet endangering the group, Leia first reprimands him, then introduces some perspective: "It could be worse."

Still, in Leia's rescue, though Han does not release Leia himself, he does command the front against the assault of Stormtrooper fire, which comes on the heels of the rescue. However, neither Han nor any of

others of the rescue group have formulated an escape plan, which is a fairly standard part of the "damsel in distress" motif. This absence is the first indication of a shift in the paradigm. When Leia realizes the rescuers have no plan, she is outraged, and instantly takes action.

The elements which signify Han united with Han as object compose the Barthian sign, the final part of the linguistic first trichotomy of Han as "language-object," and the first part of the mythic second trichotomy, called form. Han is molded into a form to provide a structure that the viewer recognizes, whose particulars may then be "suppressed" in order to communicate new information. It is the dissonance between what the viewer expects, given on the linguistic level, and the new information given on mythic level, which propels and exposes the change in the meaning of the form. In the Barthian scheme, the form is the structure with which the viewer is familiar, whose particular details, those which enabled the structure to be communicated, are de-emphasized so new information may be conveyed. The structure form provides is necessary so that the viewer may have a grounding to understand dissonant messages.

Han's form is that of the hero. He is pilot, field leader, and mercenary, filled with bravado.

Upon the release of Leia and the consequent attack by the stormtroopers, Han's role within the group shifts from that of leader to that of group member. Han does not yield leadership willingly. As shown through conversation earlier about belief in the Force, he is stubborn about his sphere of control and the ideas which seem to maintain it, whether or not they actually help him achieve his ends.

Leia seizes group leadership when she realizes that the group is without plan. Apparently she is used to more seasoned rescuers.

The group escapes the stormtrooper fire when Leia blasts a hole in a vent on an adjacent wall which leads to the trash compactor where the group gains temporary relief from the stormtrooper assault. Leia's initiative at this point is the first major action, other than relieving the untried Luke from his gun, which signals Han's coming demotion in the group dynamic.

Despite Han's initial role, as Leia transitions into group leadership, the viewer realizes Han's shortcomings as hero. Though familiar to adventure, he is unable to maintain the sort of collected, focused temperament necessary to navigate a group to safety. Ultimately, the viewer is shown Han's inability not only to lead the group, but to effectively "lead" himself. He tells Leia, "I answer to only one person. Me." She responds, "It's a wonder you've survived this long."

If Han had chosen to neglect Leia's prodding into the trash compactor, or at any of the other points where Han ultimately deferred to her judgment, he would either be dead or a Deathstar prisoner, ironically, just like Leia whom he helped "save."

On the mythic level, through Han, the viewer is shown the mutual dependence of the group, which is his Barthian signification, the sign of the mythic trichotomy. Han is the most appropriate character to communicate this information because he is definitely the most individualized, thereby creating the greatest dissonance between his initial incarnation in the linguistic trichotomy and final in the mythic trichotomy. •