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Televised Baseball: A Study in Visual Semiotics

This study offers a semiotic analysis of the difference between the way baseball is seen and experienced by fans attending a game in a ballpark and the way it is seen and experienced on television, where the director of the telecast can create a gripping psychodrama by mixing shots of players in different ways. Baseball can, at times, generate incredible tension and can lead to a powerful catharsis in viewers both at the game and watching a game on television, because games are dramatic in nature, but the television experience of a game is significantly different from seeing a game in a ball park.

Keywords

Baseball, football, signs, psychodrama, tensions, gratifications



Image 1 – Drawing by the author

Watching televised baseball is different from going to a baseball game and watching it in a baseball park. When you go to a game you find yourself sitting with tens of thousands of people and being able to see the entire field. There is a feeling of festivity and, at the same time, a diffuse kind of excitement in the air as the hometown crowd hopes the home team will win. Modern baseball parks try to be intimate but even in the smaller parks, there is often quite a distance between one's seat and home plate. This is particularly a problem for those sitting in the bleachers. Some people who go to baseball games bring binoculars so they can see the players in close-ups. Visually speaking, baseball parks are spectacular. The grass fields in baseball parks are manicured and are a brilliant green. There are brown dirt areas where the paths to bases are located, with white stripes emanating from home base to the outfield walls indicating the foul ball areas, and there are the uniforms of the players that are often colorful. The image below was taken from a television set and was from the first game of the 2019 World Series between the Houston Astros and the Washington Nationals.



Image 2 – Photo by the author

There are generally gigantic television displays in parks now, some fans paint their faces with their team's color, and there are other kinds of signage. So being in a ball-park is visually exciting and there is the element of drama connected to the game itself. At night, ballparks have an ethereal quality, bathed in light from gigantic lights on towers at various places in the parks.

When you watch a baseball game on television, it is a mediated experience. Television allows the directors of the broadcast to turn the game into a psychological battle between the pitcher and opposing batters or between the pitcher, the catcher, and runners from the opposing team when they are on base. What television does is intensify the battles discussed above by showing close-ups, and sometimes extreme close-ups of the pitcher, the hitter facing him, and any runners on base. By quick cutting between shots, directors can generate a feeling of excitement in the television audience.

When watching a televised baseball game, you find yourself carefully examining the faces of all the participants in the little drama and trying to determine how each of the participants is reacting to the events going on. Televised baseball, whatever else it might be, is an exercise in people reading and the analysis of facial expressions.



Image 3 – Photo by the author

In this image, we see a split-screen showing both the pitcher and the batter.

The average American watches more than four hours of television a day, so television plays a major role in the media diet of Americans. It is the dominant medium for most Americans. Approximately 97% of American households have television sets, and many households have more than one set. Baseball is of interest to television advertisers because it attracts a difficult to reach segment of the American population: males between eighteen and forty-five. This applies to the two other major sports as well, football and basketball.

Let me suggest the semiotic meaning of different kinds of camera shots to which people are exposed when watching a game on television.

Extreme close-ups (part of the face) suggests intense scrutiny and investigation of emotions



Image 4 – Photo by the author

Close-ups (the face only) suggest intimacy, desire to know a person. Here are Close-ups of the two pitchers. You can see the stress on the faces of these pitchers and the grim determination on their faces. Each of them threw about a hundred pitches in the game and they relievers came in.



Image 5 – Photo by the author

Medium shots (most of the body) suggest a personal relationship. This medium shot shows the concentration of the batter as he awaits the next pitch. Watching the game on television there were countless shots of all kinds following one another, especially shots of pitchers and batters.

Long shots (setting and bodies of characters) suggest context and scope. These long shots give us a sense of the ballpark. The photo shows the name of the pitcher and the batter and the team that was on the field. When you watch baseball on television, as I pointed out earlier, the experience is quite different from being in a baseball park. That is because the director of the television unit can switch between cameras quickly and offer close-ups (and sometimes extreme close-ups) of the pitchers and the batters, one after another.



Image 5 – Photo by the author

You see their facial expressions, and by quick cutting from the pitcher to the batter, the director turns the game, as shown on television, into a dramatic battle. The televised game focuses on the essential conflict that is found in baseball: a pitcher faces a batter and attempts to strike him out, if possible, or, at the least, not allow him to get a hit. Those at the game see the whole team and thus have a different perspective on what is going on.

Once a player gets a hit or is walked (receives four balls), the dynamics of the televised version of the game chang-

es, for you have a new actor in the drama. If the player who is on first is a fast runner, in addition to the drama between the pitcher and the batter, there is the drama involved between the pitcher, the player on first base and the catcher and sometimes the manager. Will the player on first base attempt to steal to second base?

If the player on first base is a very fast runner, the question often becomes when will he attempt to steal second base, not will he attempt to steal second base. And when he does, will the catcher be able to throw the ball to second base before the runner gets there and get an out. Being on second base means the player can often score a run if there is another hit.

By cutting from one shot to another, in rapid succession, the director of the televised baseball game turns the game into a dramatic confrontation between different players. If you are at the game and there is a player from the opposing team on first base, you get a sense of the drama and can wonder whether the player will try to steal to second base, but you don't have the same experience as someone watching the televised version of the game.

If the home team is way ahead of the visiting team, there isn't as much tension as if they are tied or one of the teams has a lead of one or two runs. If the game is close, baseball can create an incredible amount of tension, especially when there is a player on first base or second base or when the bases are loaded. The psychological stress can be almost unbearable. It is similar to what one feels attending a Greek tragedy or a Shakespearean tragedy, except that baseball is only a game.

The resolution of the game can also generate a powerful catharsis—especially if the home team rallies from behind and defeats the visiting team or a psychological letdown if the home team is defeated at the end of a very close game. The televised game also enables viewers to see the pitcher's "stuff," the various kinds of pitches he can throw: curveballs, sliders, change-ups, and so on, better than people attending a game.

It's amazing to watch the way pitchers can make balls curve, drop, and do various other things. In addition, when you watch a baseball game on television there is the commentary of the announcers, who speculate about things like what kind of pitch the pitcher will throw next or on what the batter might do, and so on. You can also see, imposed on the screen, the area in which a pitcher must throw a strike.



Image 6 – Photo by the author

Baseball exists on a mountain of statistics and the television commentators often supply statistics about the hitting percentages of the players involved in a “confrontation” with a pitcher, discuss the history of the teams and many other topics. Some people who attend baseball games bring portable radios so they can hear the radio commentary. These commentators who supply “color” to the televised games are analogous to Greek choruses in tragedies and baseball’s ability to generate excruciating excitement at certain stages of a game when a game is close, makes me suggest that it is similar, in nature, to Greek tragedies.

There are one hundred and sixty-two games in a Major Leagues Baseball season, so even if the team you identify with, say your home team, loses at a game you are attending or watching on television, that loss can be seen as just a bump in the road and there’s always tomorrow. Until that is, you are near the end of the baseball season when losing a game can mean your home team doesn’t go to the playoffs and a chance to play in the World Series. What we must realize is that many of the things I’ve been talking about—the close-ups of the facial expressions of the pitchers and batters, the look of the baseball parks, the uniforms of the players, the replays of pitches and hits on television, are all signs that convey information to people at the games or watching the games on television and can affect them in powerful ways.



Image 8 — Photo by the author

- Baseball
- Nineteenth-Century Pastoral
- Country boys
- Time not important
- Individualistic
- One player on offense
- Bat as weapon
- Body as a weapon
- Body contact important
- Daily
- Relatively Small parks

- Football
- Twenty-first Century Contemporary
- Educated players (in colleges, universities)
- Time precious
- Team effort
- Eleven players on offense
- Body as a weapon
- Body contact important
- Weekly
- Gigantic Stadiums

We can see from this chart that football is more closely attuned to the imperatives of contemporary life in the United States than baseball. Many Americans describe baseball as “boring,” which is a signifier of the fact that American society has become very fast-paced and, like football, obsessed with time. “Time is money,” we say.

Going to a baseball game can be seen as an exercise in nostalgia, a way for Americans to connect to America’s past and a period when time wasn’t so precious and there wasn’t so much pressure placed on people. Baseball provides Americans with a form of both cultural and psychological regression, a way to escape for a few hours (sometimes for many hours) from the pressures of contemporary digital and hyper-frenetic American culture and society.

As such, going to a baseball game has a therapeutic value and its continued existence is a testimonial to the fact that iconic cultural (or pop-cultural to be more specific) pastimes continue to play an important role in our everyday lives because of the gratifications they provide, which often function at the unconscious level. This semiotic perspective on baseball suggests that there are two versions of any game that are quite different: the game as seen in a ballpark (and the new baseball parks tend to be small (so people at the games are closer to the action) un-



Image 7 — Photo by the author

Every pitch is based on a message conveyed to the pitcher by the catcher using signs--his fingers and certain codes they both know. The extreme close-ups on television of the faces of the pitchers and batters convey emotion and stress. Televised baseball is now as much a psychodrama as an athletic contest. In fact, it is not too much of an exaggeration to say that watching a baseball game in a park is just that, watching a sporting event. But watching a baseball game on television is something completely different. On television, baseball is really a highly edited mediated psychodrama about a baseball game. Baseball can be seen as a nineteenth-century American pastoral that is not attractive to many Americans, who live in a hopped-up, postmodern world where football is now the most popular sport because it is most congruent with the American way of life. We can see the difference between the two sports in the chart (and I take some liberties with my oppositions) that follows:

like the gigantic football stadiums, which can seat 80,000 or 100,000 people) and the game as shown on television, where the quick cutting by the editors creates a psychodrama of compelling interest.

Sports are, by their very nature, dramatic and baseball, though it can at times be boring and though some games can last four or five hours, can also provide high drama and powerful catharses.

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