Forensic Semiotics: A Note on Applying Semiotics to the Study of Crime

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Abstract

The scientific study of crime comes under the general categories of forensic science and criminology, which include a large set of related branches, from forensic psychology to computer forensics. The emergence of forensic semiotics as part of this interdisciplinary amalgam is relatively unknown among both criminologists and semioticians. This paper provides an overview of the main objectives of forensic semiotics and its importance to the study of crime. One of the premises of forensic semiotics is that there is a thematic and interpretive continuity between actual crimes and their fictional representations. Actually, contemporary semiotics itself can be seen to start with Peirce’s interest in detective fiction, from which he developed several of his key ideas, including the theory of abduction. This paper also discusses some case studies that have been carried out under the rubric of forensic semiotics, which indicate the relevance of semiotic analysis to the study of crime.

Keywords: forensic science, detective story, abduction, crime, Mafia, semiotics

Introduction

The science of crime, or forensic science, crystallized at around the same time as Gothic and detective literature in the latter part of the nineteenth century (Arntfield,
2016), even though autopsies and other investigative techniques go back to medieval China and to twelfth-century England with the establishment of the Office of the Coroner, which kept records of all criminal matters and investigated homicides and suspicious deaths. The British colonists brought the coroner system to America, which was reconstructed as the office of the Medical Examiner, starting in 1877 in Massachusetts. In the same era new crime-solving techniques were emerging in Europe and America allowing criminal investigations to become guided more and more by science. Already in 1829, the Metropolitan Police Act established a Scotland Yard detective department, which investigated crimes with emerging techniques such as fingerprinting. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the study of the criminal mind also surfaced—prefiguring forensic psychology. In 1876, for example, Cesare Lombroso, an Italian physician, examined the physical morphology of known criminals, classifying traits of facial expression, cranium size, eye structure, and so on, coming to the conclusion that certain traits differentiated criminals from the general population. Although Lombroso’s ideas are now largely rejected, his approach laid the basis for the modern science of criminal profiling, which operates under the principle that criminals do not look the same way, but they are likely to act and behave in similar ways.

These developments dovetailed, as mentioned, with the rise and spread of Gothic and fictional detective literature. Many of the techniques, ideas, and practices used in crime investigations in the era were actually modeled on those employed by fictional detectives such as C. Auguste Dupin (created by Poe) and Sherlock Holmes (created, of course, by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle). As Ronald Thomas (1999) has argued and copiously illustrated, the early methods and devices of forensic science (such as the polygraph, the mug shot, fingerprinting, photographic analysis, etc.) were inspired by detective fiction (Danesi, 2013; Arntfield, 2016). Vice versa, new forensic techniques were quickly adopted and adapted by fiction writers in order to make their stories more exciting, realistic, and in line with the emerging cultural scientism of the era. The dalliance between forensic science and crime fiction generated a fascination with crime itself that continues to this day, as can be seen by the large numbers of crime narratives in movies, television, and in other media. At the same time that
forensic science and crime fiction formed an early partnership, Peircean semiotics (1931) also crystallized from the same intellectual substratum. Peirce saw the importance of detective fiction as a model for semiotic analysis and understanding of human cognition. Solving a crime, such as a murder, is akin to deciphering the signs involved in its commission and their connection to the perpetrator’s mind and the cultural milieu in which the crime was committed. In previous work, the study of this connection was called forensic semiotics (Danesi, 2013; Arntfield & Danesi, 2016), in acknowledgment of the historical continuity between detective fiction, forensic science, and Peircean semiotics.

This paper examines the possibility of forensic semiotics becoming relevant to all aspects of the study of crime. The objective is to argue and illustrate to both semioticians and forensic scientists that crime is a fertile ground for semiotic analysis, since it can provide key insights not only into the cultural dimensions of crime, but also into the type of semiosis that characterizes criminal acts and what this might ultimately tell us about the presence of crime in human societies. It is claimed that forensic semiotics would greatly enhance and broaden the scientific terrains of both forensic science and criminology.

Semiotics and the Detective Story

In a classic collection of studies, titled Dupin, Holmes, Peirce: The Sign of Three (1983), edited by Umberto Eco and Thomas A. Sebeok, modern-day criminology and forensic science are linked, both indirectly and explicitly, to the detective stories of Edgar Allan Poe and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. In a way, this is the founding text for what came later to be called forensic semiotics (Danesi, 2013). Literary historians consider Poe’s three stories “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” (1841), “The Mystery of Marie Rogêt” (1842), and “The Purloined Letter” (1844) as the first examples of the modern fictional detective story. In these stories, Poe created the figure of the detective hero, C. Auguste Dupin—an intellectual hero who solves crimes with a brilliant display of reasoning and sign analysis. Peirce (1931) became so intrigued by the thinking prowess manifested by Dupin, who makes informed hunches by
interpreting the clues left behind by the criminal, that he termed it abduction, as is well known. Actually, Dupin uses different modes of reasoning at various stages of his investigations. He applies deductive reasoning to the organization of the clues, much like the pieces of jigsaw puzzle; he employs inductive reasoning to gain an assessment of the picture that emerges; and he uses abduction to interpret that picture, which ultimately reveals the true story behind the crime.

Sherlock Holmes, the successor to Dupin, employed the exact same type of tripartite reasoning. In the first Holmes story, “A Study in Scarlet” (1867), Doctor Watson, Holmes’s assistant, compares the master detective to Dupin, thus paying indirect tribute to Poe as the founder of the detective story. The detective story is, in a sense, a modern-day morality play. Evil must be exposed and conquered, not in any bellicose or military way, but through the strategies of human thinking. In the medieval period, evil was vanquished by spiritual forces; today, it is vanquished by a detective or superhero crime fighter using the powers of human reasoning. The morality play flourished in the 1400s and 1500s, dramatizing Biblical events. The narrative typically portrayed a relevant spiritual theme, such as the Seven Deadly Sins, Virtue, Vice, Riches, Poverty, Knowledge, Ignorance, or Grace. Each play revolved around an allegorical figure called Mankind, who represented common people and their souls. His antagonist was Vice, who often appeared as the Devil, full of tricks and disguises. Mankind was easily deceived by Vice, who must be conquered in order to gain salvation. The morality plays were hugely popular. It can be argued that the detective story is a thematic derivative, with Mankind being replaced by the master detective and Vice as the murderous villain. As in the morality plays, the modern killer generates a state of chaotic moral uncertainty; the hero detective comes forth to restore our sense of moral balance not only by capturing the murderer, but also by explaining the crime psychologically and socially, in lieu of medieval theological admonishments.

The detective story has evolved considerably since Poe and Conan Doyle, but it retains its moralistic subtext—crime must be conquered or else moral chaos emerges. Pulp fiction magazines such as Black Mask, Dime Detective, and Detective Fiction Weekly became very popular in the 1920s, 1930s and the early 1940s, featuring
hardboiled detectives who fought crime on the mean streets of the modern city, depicted as a hell-on-earth that required a superhuman intelligence to set things right. In all its versions, the subtext of the detective story is restoring moral order through the powers of the intellect. Unless the story is given a postmodern twist, as in some of Alfred Hitchcock’s stories, the detective has superhuman qualities matching the sinister skills of the modern-day “demon” killer who hides in the dark and whose identity remains unknown until the detective makes it known to us.

The importance of crime as a metaphor for morality in modern-day secular life can be seen in Michelangelo Antonioni’s marvelous film Blow-Up (1966). A successful photographer in the city London, whose daily life revolves around fashion, jazz music, drugs, cigarettes, and sex, starts to realize at a certain point that his life is tedious, mechanical, and meaningless. This changes after he meets a beautiful young mysterious woman, who mesmerizes him. He takes photos of her incessantly. At one point, he notices something frightful in the background of one of the photographs he took of her in a park. After studying the blow-up of the photo, he sees the figure of a corpse and uncovers details which suggest that a murder had taken place. He goes back to the crime scene, but the body has disappeared. Confused, he starts searching indefatigably for the body or at least an explanation of why it has disappeared. Neither comes. So at the end he ends up watching a tennis match (likely in a dream) with imaginary balls being used. The tennis match scene slowly fades leaving only the grass where the body was photographed. The unsolved crime leaves the protagonist and the viewer in a state of moral suspension, as a metaphor for our inability to solve life’s dilemmas. When we end up not knowing the truth behind a crime we tend to experience a sort of existential Angst, leaving us in a state of ambiguity.

Dupin and Sherlock Holmes are surrogate semioticians, who read signs at a crime scene and then reason backwards to figure out what they mean. Influenced by these two fictional detective-semioticians, Peirce saw the study of signs as equivalent to the study of the clues found at crime scenes. As Sebeok and Umiker-Sebeok argued in 1980, Peircean semiotics is a de facto type of forensic-detective science, dubbing Peirce a “consulting detective” and Sherlock Holmes a “consulting semiotician”. Despite Holmes’s common exhortation that he never guesses, Sebeok and Umiker-
Sebeok showed that he does indeed indulge in guesswork: “Testing a hypothesis as to the identity of a person through the collection of clues from that individual’s physical appearance, speech patterns, and the like, always involves a certain amount of guessing, for which reason Peirce calls it abductive induction” (Sebeok & Umiker-Sebeok, 1980, p. 63). Peircean semiotics and crime detection are, in effect, two sides of the same intellectual paradigm.

This very perspective was incorporated brilliantly by the late Umberto Eco in his fiction masterpiece, *The Name of the Rose* (1983), in which he shows how crime detection and semiotic analysis are indistinguishable ontologically. The plot takes place in a cloistered medieval monastery where monks are being murdered by a serial killer living amongst them. The hero who investigates the crimes is a learned Franciscan monk named William of Baskerville—a name that is transparently allusive to the Sherlock Holmes classic detective tale “The Hound of the Baskervilles” (1902) and its dark and ominous setting. The monk solves the crimes in the same manner and style of Holmes, interpreting the signs left by the killer at each crime scene by a luminous display of abductive reasoning—putting the clues together in such a way as to tell the story of the crime and to expose the mind of the killer. At the same time, Eco uses the situation as a metaphor of change in the medieval mindset, which was moving away from a strictly religious worldview to an increasingly secular one that ended up with humanism and the Renaissance shortly thereafter.

In “A Study in Scarlet” Holmes explains his solution to the crime as “intuitive clue gathering”. When Watson asks him to explain what he means by it, in a subsequent story, “The Sign of Four” (1890), Holmes replies: “Ah, that is good luck. I could only explain the balance of probability. I did not at all expect to be so accurate.” This is actually a description of abduction itself, unwittingly of course. Today, even with powerful forensic tools, such as DNA, the solution to a crime starts with this kind of intuitive clue gathering. Interestingly, Conan Doyle was a medical student at the University of Edinburgh in 1877 where one of his professors, Dr. Joseph Bell, was a pioneering forensic pathologist. Bell taught Conan Doyle to envision crime investigation as a blend of science and inference art. Doyle became Bell’s assistant, observing his mentor’s crime detection skills firsthand. Bell would often
make remarks on the significance of the walking style and linguistic mannerisms of strangers, as potential clues to establish the identity of a criminal. Incredibly, Bell was generally correct with his “hunches”. So impressed was Conan Doyle that he modeled his fictional sleuth after his mentor who would supposedly say to his student, as does Holmes to Watson, “It was elementary.”

The Sherlock Holmes stories are essays in forensics, criminology, semiotic method, and the psychology of the human mind at once (Konnikova, 2013; O’Brien, 2013). Conan Doyle certainly understood that there is a moral dimension to crime and that we can penetrate the nature of morality itself by examining crimes and their perpetrators. The Holmes detective stories have become staples of modern-day literary and forensic culture. It can be argued, in fact, the Holmes was the first forensic semiotician, who employed sign-detection and sign-identification to solve a crime.

To summarize, crime fiction writers have always been keenly aware of the power of symbols in crime stories. Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* or Poe’s tales of murder and terror are really forensic semiotic narratives. They offer insights into the non-rational and in some cases irrational forces that shape criminal behavior. For example, some serial killers practice necrophilia in order to vicariously relive their crimes through the symbolic presence of the body, reactivating the resonances and excitement associated with the crime and its anti-repression functions. Revitalized moments such as these fulfill the killer’s need to reify his subjectivity. This is where the killer’s sense of self surfaces as a center of control. The bodies are trophies that represent signs of self-awareness. Crime sites become loci where self-construction can unfold. One of the fundamental premises of forensic semiotics is that there is a continuity between fictional crimes and real ones (Arntfield & Danesi, 2017)—they reflect and influence each other.

A concrete example of the latter premise is the phenomenon of copycat crimes (Coleman, 2004). Most of the persons who mimic crimes seen in the media have prior criminal records, prior severe mental health problems, or a history of violence, suggesting that the effect of the media is indirect. But there are some cases which show that people are simply looking for a moment in the spotlight as serial killers. Crime seems to empower some people, affording them an identity that they desire and
that they cannot attain, perhaps, in any other way.

Forensic Semiotics

The term *forensic semiotics* is not new. It has been used to indicate various things, such as its use by William Buckland (2007) to refer to writing styles and features that can be used to identify authorship (length of sentence, vocabulary patterns, word frequencies, and so on). The meaning of forensic semiotics as a branch of semiotics, criminology and forensic science was put forth in 2013 (Danesi, 2013), in acknowledgment of Peirce’s admiration of the Poe and Conan Doyle narratives, aiming to apply semiotics to the study of both crime detection and of the more general question of the relation of crime to meaning, culture, and history. In the same way that Foucault (1972) argued that the meanings of sexuality and mental disease were tied to cultural-historical emphases and changes, so too it can be argued that the meanings of crime cannot be determined in the absolute—but in contextual, historical, and situation-specific ways. With few exceptions, killing in war is not defined as murder; but if the same soldier killed the same person outside of war it would be seen as homicide. Labeling something as a crime, such as murder, requires interpretation within a cultural context.

The more forensic scientists and criminologists become aware how signs manifest the operation of the criminal mind, the more will they be able to understand crime, as the early detective writers certainly knew and as Peirce also emphasized. There are two basic ways in which semiotics can be used directly (Danesi, 2013). The first one can be called *first-order forensic semiotics* (FS₁). The aim of FS₁ is to apply the theory of signs and the practices of sign analysis to the evidence collected by forensic scientists. It can especially help interrogators and investigators understand how facial expressions, gesture, language, and other sign systems can be used to recognize deception and to identify perpetrators—much like Conan Doyle’s mentor, Bell, also understood. The second basic way in which semiotics can be used is to help gauge the connection among crime, fictional (and media) depictions of it, and cultural definitions and perceptions of crime. The study of this linkage can be designated
second-order forensic semiotics (FS\(^2\)).

FS\(^2\) has actually started receiving broad attention from criminologists, although it is not always named as such. There is now a major journal, *Crime, Media, Culture* that publishes research on the relationship between crime, criminal justice, media, and cultural trends. One of the interesting phenomena that criminologists study is called the *crime multiplier effect*, which refers to the impacts of real criminal events on social perceptions and mores through media exposure. The case of the O. J. Simpson chase scene televised live (as it was happening) in 1994 and Simpson’s subsequent trial (also televised live) is a case-in-point. Given that Simpson was a media icon himself the whole event became a spectacle that shaped people’s opinions about his guilt or innocence in the double murder of his ex-wife Nicole Simpson and friend Ronald Goldman. And given the racial subtext of the case, the trial turned into a social justice trial. It showed, as Cotterill (2002) has argued, that media-showcased trials are theatrical events that influence their outcomes, as well as being morality plays not unlike the medieval plays.

Forensic semiotic analysis was applied to a murder case at the University of Toronto (Danesi, 2014)—the cold-case murder of David Buller, a professor who was killed in his office on the campus on January 18, 2001. Buller was a visual artist, so, the starting point for cracking his case was his artwork, which allows the semiotician to make sense of his life, and to investigate whether signs in his artwork could point to a period, event, or person that would be relevant to the investigation of his murder. The case was investigated but not solved, quickly receding from the headlines and from campus memory. Thirteen years later the author of this article was approached by an ex-student in semiotics, Renee Willmon, who believed that I could shed some light on this very case, given that Buller had left behind some paintings that may have been relevant to solving the cold case. I was extremely skeptical, but nonetheless intrigued. I knew nothing about the police investigation nor had any recollection at all of the details of the case. Essentially, I was asked to do a semiotic interpretation of Buller’s paintings to see if they would yield any clues about the crime.

I went to an exposition of Buller’s paintings in July of 2013. I had no information about his background and private life, nor any details related to the crime scene. It
was immediately obvious that Buller’s early works emulated Andy Warhol, revealing as well Buller’s sexual orientation. His last two paintings were especially significant. One seemed to represent what forensic scientists call a “blood spatter” scene, with an individual hovering in the background and thus, presumably, in the mind’s eye of the painter. I did not know at the time how Buller died, but I inquired if he had been stabbed multiple times and if there was significant blood at the crime scene. The answer was yes on both counts. The painting, I concluded, foreshadowed the manner of Buller’s death. There was also a chiaroscuro aspect to the work that juxtaposed the painter’s dark fear onto a brighter world found in his earlier work. The latter was fading quickly from Buller’s life. His last painting put a final exclamation mark to the sense of fear and ominous menace that he etched into a dark canvas.

The figure of a man kept appearing throughout Buller’s art opus, disappearing into darkness in the final painting. I suspected that the figure was a forlorn lover who Buller feared would eventually murder him. I presented this conclusion to the art curators, who were friends of the late professor, and they informed me that the police had indeed identified that very man as the likely perpetrator, but did not have enough evidence to arrest him. What was especially interesting to them was the semiotic method I used to come to the same conclusion.

This case emphasized how semiotics can help in the investigation and explanation of crime. In David Buller’s paintings, there were definite clues to his state of mind and his apprehension of impending doom. It is clear that the signs that Buller left in his last two painting can be used retroactively by cold case investigators. The same can be said about verbal texts. Together with a criminologist and ex-policeman, Michael Arntfield, I was able to test out this hypothesis, analyzing the writings of actual murderers and those of mystery writers, comparing them to see if any relevant insights into the criminal mind could be gleaned from such a semiotic analysis. The result was a study that aimed to illustrate how verbal texts do indeed provide insights into the homicidal mind (Arntfield & Danesi, 2017). Analyzing the written notes, manifestoes, and mementoes by murderers allowed us to paint an overall psycho-graphic profile of the murderer in historical context. We were even able to identify a serial murderer who was unknown at the time. The details of the latter came out a year later.
Application to Mafia Culture

Another area to which the present author has applied forensic semiotics in collaboration with an anti-Mafia journalist, Antonio Nicaso, is organized crime (Nicaso & Danesi, 2013). Particularly relevant to our overall approach was the analysis of the symbols and rituals used in Mafia culture, which impart a sense of metaphysical authority to the criminal gang. Joining the Mafia is akin to joining an ersatz religious order, complete with oaths, rituals, special symbolic practices, rules of conduct, punishments, and so on. Omertà (the code of honor and manliness) is as much a self-styled religious code as it is a pseudo-chivalric one. This connection to religion and rustic chivalry allows the Mafia to insert itself seamlessly into the cultural substratum of southern Italy.

We discovered that rituals and symbols are what give membership in the Mafia permanence and significance. Without them, the criminal organization would have a harder time maintaining the crucial emotional bonds among their members that keep them together. Rituals mark recurring important events in a person’s or a community’s life, such as birth, marriage, and death. One of the most important ceremonies for criminal groups is the one used for initiating new members into the clan, turning them into “made men.” The initiate knows full well that in order to become a new man he will have to reject his past, and his real family, symbolically by pledging exclusive allegiance to the clan, which then becomes his only family.

People do not grasp reality directly, but through evaluative signs (words, symbols) of it. In a fundamental way, our signs and sign systems are fictive, because they do not tell the real story of existence, but only a selective and interpretative version of it. Criminal organizations certainly have grasped this basic principle of semiotics, manipulating fact with fiction in order to produce a mystique for themselves (Smith, 1975). Much of the Mafia mystique captured in movies and real life, in fact, revolves around symbols associated with ritual mysticism (symbols borrowed from religious orders, secret societies, and other groups), mystification (unique bits of language) and styles of self-presentation. There is drama associated with Mafia rituals, even if the actual ceremonies are quite unglamorous and dull to outsiders. Criminal groups
are what the sociologist Emile Durkheim (1912) called “segmentary societies”,
that is, groups that depend for their survival on producing “mechanical solidarity”
through a ritualistic replication of existing cultural forms. Ritual is the first phase in
achieving replication and thus obtaining consensus to the cause from new recruits.
It thus recreates the identity of the new member, fashioning it in conformity to the
expectations of the group. The objective is to impart to the participant a new belief
system and role as part of a new family, as well as how he is supposed to relate to
others. As Dickie (2004, p. 37) notes: “More than anything else about the mafia, the
initiation ritual bolsters widespread myths about how ancient the organization is. In
reality, it is as modern as everything else about the mafia.” The first description of the
ritual of allegiance is found in a police report of 1876 in Palermo regarding a Mafia
clan led by Antonio Giammona, one of the first infamous Mafia bosses in the post-
unification period of Italy. At about the same time, the Mafia decided to perpetrate a
mythology of its origins, as descendant of chivalric knights—a confabulated tale to
embed the criminal gang into a mythic cultural substratum.

Criminal societies invariably tell stories that trace their origins to some myth
or fable, so as to impart a sense of historical validity and legitimacy to themselves.
Crime in Sicily came about as a consequence of its socially-unequal feudal system.
The absentee noblemen needed strong men with local power and influence to manage
their estates, who also did not have much respect for the law. Thugs were hired as
the noblemen’s personal guardiani (“guardians”). Corruption was rampant. Many
judges bought their posts; clerks were paid little or nothing. Having no faith in the
system, people sought out other means of protection. Banditry established itself early
on as a protection racket, spreading throughout Sicilian society in the nineteenth
century. During the rebellion of 1848 against Sicily’s Bourbon rulers the bandits
opportunistically joined the uprising. As a consequence, the Mafia gained legitimacy
and power, since the fighters for unity had seen the organization as an ally. As Lunde
(2004, p. 55) notes, it was the “traditional Sicilian suspicion of state institutions that
created the conditions in which the Mafia could develop.”

In the case of the three traditional Mafias of southern Italy (the Sicilian Mafia, the
Calabrian ‘Ndrangheta, and the Neapolitan Camorra), an unsubstantiated foundation
myth has been weaved to unite the three—the Garduña, a group that emerged in the prisons in Spain that evolved into a secret criminal society whose main activity was murder-for-hire. A Calabrian legend tells of three Garduña brothers who left Spain after having murdered a nobleman for assaulting their sister. During one of their forays they were shipwrecked on the island of Favignana, with one making his way to Naples, founding the Camorra, another to Calabria, founding the ‘Ndrangheta, and the third to Sicily, founding the Mafia. The story is an allegory, connecting the criminal gangs to pirate culture in the era of the Spanish Empire. But history shows that the ‘Ndrangheta, like the Mafia, emerged when the interests of the organization coincided with the interests of landowners, politicians and other authorities to control voting in order to maintain the status quo. Criminologists who do not take the mythology into account, would be leaving out a key semiotic function of historical tales—establishing cultural reality.

The mythological strategy is overlaid with intertextuality. This is why quotations from the Bible are found throughout the documents of the criminal gangs rounded up by the police. They impart a sense of religiosity to the criminal activities. One organization, the Sacra Corona Unita (“the United Sacred Rosary”), which is based in the Puglia region, has even named itself after a powerful religious artifact, the sacra corona (“sacred rosary”), which will purportedly unify the group as in a religious cult. Police raids of the homes of Mafiosi have uncovered religious icons and artifacts scattered throughout them, showing tangibly the convenient connection utilized by these gangs to religiosity. The Mafia is seen as an honorable gang in part because of this allegiance to traditional practices and its dislike of the modern world’s materialistic values, which they see as foolish and as going against the traditions and history of the true Italy.

Perhaps the most crucial of all rituals in criminal organizations are those that bring a new member into the fold. These mark an individual’s entry into a new life, helping him understand and accept his new role. To be eligible for initiation into the traditional Mafia, the prospective member often has to participate in a killing—known as “making bones.” The candidate will then wait to be asked to attend a special meeting of the clan, with members sitting around a table located at some sacred place. After
answering the clan’s questions, the process of being “made” in the mold of a Mafia knight begins for the initiate. Significantly, the ritual involves holding the burning image of a saint and reciting an oath of secrecy and obedience. The clan leader will then take a knife and cut the candidate’s trigger finger. The blood from the finger symbolizes both his own death and that of those that he will eventually have to kill. Death in the case of the candidate is both metaphorical (leaving behind his previous life to be reborn into the new one), and literal, since any breach of trust will end up in his own death. The burning part of the ritual is also symbolic of metaphorical death. As Lunde (2004, p. 68) notes, it binds the initiate to the clan for life:

Initiation consisted of a blood oath and an oath of obedience. The aspiring member had to be presented for initiation by at least three “men of honor” from the family. Blood was drawn from the initiate’s finger and sprinkled on the picture of a saint, which was set on fire and passed from hand to hand while the initiate swore to keep the code of Cosa Nostra, which he was bound to for life. His cosca was his new family, and he could not switch allegiance.

In some clans fire is used to burn limbs in order to extract allegiance through bravery. Fire represents purification and the attainment of wisdom. It purifies the initiate making him worthy of being called a clan member. It also implies taking risks, for the Mafioso is expected, symbolically and literally, to show his courage and allegiance by putting up with fire burning in his hand. He cannot show any.

In addition to initiation and passage rites, there are rites (explicit or implicit) that govern virtually every aspect of clan life. To commemorate the death of another Mafioso, the women are expected to dress in black and to display their grief at the funeral by crying and praying out loud over the casket. As the weeping takes place, the capo, or some other high-ranking member, goes to the mother or wife of the dead Mafioso to hug her in order to console her. She is, however, expected to rebuff his consolation, beating her breast with her fists. The Mafioso must nonetheless insist on providing consolation, whereby she finally gives in and allows him to hug her until she stops sobbing to show resignation to the death. By so doing, the woman shows
acceptance of the role of the Mafia in her life and acknowledges her submission to its principles of omertà. As Lunde (2004, p. 57) explains: “the true Mafioso looks after his crime family like a father, often serving as godfather to the children of his underlings, attending their weddings and funerals, and holding frequent, almost ritual banquets, where the seating arrangement reflects each person’s status in the family.”

The relevance of forensic semiotics overall in the study of Mafia culture is its ability to identify which symbolic (sign-using) practices become intrinsic to group identity and cohesion. As discussed above, rituals without symbols would be literally meaningless. They assign a memorable form to events in the world, requiring no theory or explanatory science to grasp their meaning. The symbols used by the Mafia tap into this “symbolic instinct.” The symbols of blood, fire, and hands are common ones, as mentioned. Blood is connected to life and rebirth and to family lineage. The symbolism of blood ties in Mafia culture is explained by Lunde (2004, p. 55) as follows:

In a world where power was arbitrary, safety lay in the family. The larger and more extended the kinship group. The more protected the individual, especially in a social system of vendettas, where honor demanded that no offense should be allowed to pass unavenged. An army of brothers and cousins was the best protection in an unjust world. Nothing is as important to a Sicilian as the ties of blood.

As Reynolds (2006, p. 192) puts it, “Much of the glamour and intrigue that outsiders associate with Cosa Nostra flows from omertà, the code of honor sealed in a secret induction ceremony that presses the sanctity of the code upon is members.” It is no coincidence that the symbol of the Calabrian Mafia is the biblical tree of knowledge that is divided into the trunk (the head of the clan) who exerts power over the smaller part of the trunk, the branches, and the leaves.

**Thinking like Sherlock Holmes**

The modes of analysis that Sherlock Holmes uses to solve crimes are not much different from those used today in forensic science. Both inhere in decoding the
signs of crime in a coherent logical way. In “The Hound of the Baskervilles” (1901), the terrified and distorted face of the victim, Sir Baskerville, is meant to signify the terror of confronting the ghost hound from his family legend. The lantern is used to observe the footprints and their meanings. Holmes infers that the man’s footprints show that he was running in fear from a large dog, which also left footprints. This suggests a scene that seems to be consistent with the legend of a dog that kills all of the Baskerville heirs. A letter is found at a certain point that turns out to be a contrived scheme to scare the next supposed victim of the ghost dog away. It is later revealed that the letter was, in fact, written by the suspect’s wife in such a way as to disguise that she was the one who wrote it. It is discovered that she did not want her husband to continue with his plan, and therefore tried to scare him through the letter. To Holmes, the scent of White Jasmine emanating from the letter pointed to the wife who wear the perfume. Despite her husband’s insistence that she help him in his criminal plan, she remained resistant to it, having a moral conscience. The dirt retrieved from the horse cab near the end of the story was tied to the suspect due to the fact that he carried out excavation digs on the moors. The cab-dirt, which appeared similar to the moor-dirt, was transferred from the moor to the suspect’s boots and then to the horse cab.

The reasoning used by Holmes is truly impressive. The contorted facial features are at first thought to be symptoms of a heart attack, but then, Homes informed the medical examiner that it was in reaction to a monstrous hound that prompted the heart attack, hence the terrified facial expression. The anonymous letter could only be written by a well-educated person, given that it was constructed with cutouts from a newspaper. The poor handwriting that appeared on the envelope as the address script, also, did not match the character of someone who would have a newspaper in his or her possession. Holmes stated that this was “obviously” the attempt of a well-educated individual to make it appear as if an uneducated man composed the letter. The note had a scent on it, which as mentioned, turned out to be White Jasmine, the scent of the perfume that the suspect’s wife wears.

In two books (Konnikova, 2013; O’Brien, 2013), the importance of Sherlock Holmes to the development of modern forensic science is cogently emphasized,
although there is no reference to Peirce or semiotics. What really attracts us, as Peirce implied, was Holmes’ powers of reasoning, which, as Konnikova also points out, involved observation, not just detection. Konnikova distinguishes between the “Watson system” of analysis, or the natural tendency to believe what we hear and see, from the “Holmes system,” the use of questions, observations, and presence of mind. It constitutes a kind of dialectic process that constantly generates hypotheses and inferences until these can be pared down to one conclusion—the only one that can be connected to a crime. This is exactly how abduction works.

Crime scene investigations are not only effective because they utilize a combination of scientific methods and procedures, but also, and especially, because they constitute a basic form of semiotic analysis à la Sherlock Holmes. Each clue present at a crime scene has a plethora of possible meanings, which need to be examined in the context of the scene, in the light of relevant cultural and historical knowledge, and in terms of available scientific information, in order to be properly interpreted. Even if the first assumptions prove to be false, the placement of the signs in relation to the other signs present at the scene as a form of analysis may help guide the investigators to a logically connected system, which can be modified or even rejected. Like Holmes, forensic scientists solve baffling crimes through clever observation and abduction.

**Concluding Remarks**

Today, there is a growing sense among the police and criminologists that to understand the etiology of criminal behavior and of organized crime groups one must look at rituals, symbolism, and various sign-based practices much more seriously. Some police forces are starting to turn to semiotics, as an investigative tool in criminal investigations. For example, the Center for Homicide Research in New Orleans has adopted semiotic techniques to investigate crime scenes and to decode the symbolism used by criminals and gangs. The courts are also beginning to use semiotic evidence in criminal proceedings. In the city of Edmonton, Canada, for example, the court may look at whether or not an accused person uses a name, word, symbol, or other form
that identifies, or is associated with, a criminal organization, in order to determine whether the accused participates in the criminal organization.

Another striking event was a trial in 2015 of a California man charged with operating an online black-market bazaar. During the course of the trial, which took place in New York City, the lawyer of the accused raised an objection suggesting that a critical piece of evidence was omitted by the trial prosecutors—namely, a smiley. The objection arose after a prosecutor had finished reading an Internet post written by the accused, making no mention of the happy-face emoji that accompanied it. The intent of the lawyer was to argue that the use of the emoji showed that his client was not being serious, but rather playful, and thus that there really was no criminal intent in the first place. The judge instructed the jury that it should take into account any such symbols in messages. In a phrase, an emoji was allowed in a court of law as evidence about someone’s intended meaning, and thus, as revelatory about someone’s state of mind as verbal statements or admissions.

This was an indirect application of forensic semiotics, focusing on a visual symbol. In the same year, the Pittsburgh police also presented three emoji in a text message as evidence in a double-homicide trial. The prosecutors argued that the emoji would help prove that the person who sent it, who was shot himself during the commission of a robbery, was responsible for the deadly gunfire. The message-sender spent five days in a coma before regaining consciousness. The prosecutors claimed that the emoji he sent before the shooting showed that he intended to participate in the robbery that led to the killings. The emoji depicted a man running, an explosion, and a gun. These cases and situations make it saliently obvious that forensic semiotics is already an unconscious mindset in need of being made concrete.

The purpose of this paper has been to argue for such concreteness. Crime is becoming a planetary phenomenon because of the global village, making the tools of semiotics for forensic science even more compelling. Everything from terrorist warfare to common fraud is announced, planned, and showcased in online venues. Is there a semiotic dynamism between online and offline crimes? Or has the former become a more powerful form of criminality? Forensic semiotics can certainly attempt to investigate this question, by taking a look at this new stark reality facing the police.
and forensic scientists.

The Internet has made lying, dissimulation, and confabulation common modes of interacting. It has enabled the pathological or compulsive liar to gain a voice that can be spread widely. Medieval society had mythic monsters and demons to explain evil; we have real killers. As Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) often pointed out mythic monsters are needed for restoring our belief in sacredness through an engagement in its counterpart. The connection of crime to sign systems and to history is something that is best approached through the lens of semiotic analysis.

References


**About the author**

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