

# Qualisigns, Metaphors, and substitutional semes in The Dark Knight

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## Abstract

This article aims to identify the presence and function of qualisigns, metaphors, and substitutional semes in *The Dark Knight*. In addition to their identification, they will also be linked, so as to better comprehend their use in practice.

For this, contextual and intertextual elements, from the film, are used to analyze character behavior, as well as their respective functions throughout story. Similarly, icons, which have permitted the representation of protagonists in real life, given by *DC Comics* fiction, were grouped, and those bases which permitted the existence of said characters on the big screen were studied. Finally, the function and form of each rhetorical figure within the production were analyzed.

**Key words:** Cinema; Cinematographic analysis; Fiction; language.

One of the main bases, maintained by Umberto Eco (1973), for the obtention and generation of signs are the senses. These permit humans to engage with their environment, learn from it, and recreate therein. Thus, the need to engage with a still environment emerges, and permits one to be immobile in time, and that time be versatile. Joseph Nicéphore Niépce (inventor of the first successful photographic process<sup>3</sup>) satisfied this need by creating photography, which became the most-used iconic mean in history, and a choice element for the representation of reality. Much later, the rapid repetition of these images, on a single film, would evolve into video and VHS, thanks to John Logie Baird (creator of electromechanical television<sup>4</sup>), which lent new meaning to signs: the iconic digital representation.

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3 See: [https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joseph\\_Nic%C3%A9phore\\_Ni%C3%A9pce](https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joseph_Nic%C3%A9phore_Ni%C3%A9pce)

4 See: [https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/John\\_Logie\\_Baird](https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Logie_Baird)

This basis is that which permitted the generation of films which crossed over, from fiction to reality, which, on this occasion, served as mediators for the impulse of Bob Kane and Bill Flinger's concept in *Batman*, a movie directed by Christopher Nolan (2008). This was established as a superhero, comic, and movie, which encompassed the means of the time.

At the time of its creation, the symbology present between superheroes and villains had been marked as practically normative in stories similar to that of *Batman*. As such, the representation of a qualisign, in the form of a villain, was incorporated into the plot.

Joker comes off the comic printers with a qualisign devised by geniuses: a solitary, red, disheveled mouth that is unintelligible without context. His story becomes a sinsign, but at that time, was merely the outline of a reality exclusive to fictitious characters.

The presence of protagonistic and antagonistic characters provided an empty space for the citizens of Gotham City to fill, as they were the Joker's preferred victims, and Batman's favorite citizens to defend, in the never-ending struggle. Batman's obligations, in fiction, were multiple, and there was no way to know when or where his help was needed. For this reason, the *Gotham City* police department installed the bat-signal, a *led* device that would beam a sign into the sky, in the form of a bat, when a citizen needed rescuing. Intermittently, they adopted a substitutional seme: instead of saying "We need help", the reflector was lit, from which he gleaned said message.

Three key *concepts* permit reading of the movie *The Dark Knight*: qualisigns, metaphors, and substitutional semes.

- *Qualisigns*: "...correspond to the first category, as they are qualities (colors, forms, textures, etc.) that in and of themselves are mere possibilities until manifested in a sinsign (an existing sign)" (Vitale, 2002, 29). In accordance with Zeballos (2002), this figure is a sign in quality form. It is the generality of a sign, but permits its substitution, given that it is not yet a complete sign. For Pierce (2015), a qualisign is a quality that is a sign. In fact, it cannot act as a sign until it has been embodied. However, said embodiment has no relationship with its character as a sign.
- *Metaphor*: according to Redaccionejemplo.com (2011), this is a rhetorical figure, in which a similarity relationship is established between two terms and a characteristic or quality that both possess, for example, the use of double entendres. For Muñoz (2000), a metaphor is an invention free from discourse, a trope that may be analyzed as an effect of both language and the context in which it is written. Metaphors are linguistic figures, in which, by analogy or comparison, one term replaces another with an alternate meaning. Metaphors create meaning where there is none. In the terms of Coll-Vehí (1901), it may be indicated that metaphors express one idea with the sign of another, with which the analogy or similarity exists.
- *Substitutional semes*: the last term for this analysis, in which, as stated by Eco (1973), these signs refer only to other signs that have been classified, in terms of substitutional semes. Similarly, one must distinguish between means of channeling, whether limited to sensorial channels, or the way in which certain signs are recei-

ved. Eric Buysens (1970) has studied these sign categories, calling them semes. Substitution, finally, puts a person or thing in the place of another person or thing (Real Academia Española).

In order to clarify the relationship between these three basic concepts, in the movie analyzed, the Joker's personality must be highlighted: he is a mentally unstable character who hates society's way of thinking, and who, previously, had attempted to become a comedian. The result? a metaphor, one of the Joker's weapons when he needs to express himself, but his subtlety does not permit this, or when the situation invites the expression of an idea with "grace".

Cinema has evolved not to express ideas explicitly. Now, a tone of light, a shot, a guiding rhythm, the volume of noise or music, among many other possible forms of using ingenuity, speak for themselves and mold context. *The Dark Knight* is fraught with this, given its essence. It is a film that conserves comic-like style and intensity, charged with color and rhetorical figures, but elevates said comic style to the audiovisual. Nothing is left to chance in this film, every detail counts.

Said details are the basis for the sign, artificiality. This is easily concluded, as only humans are capable of reason, regarding that which surrounds them. Umberto Eco alludes to the creation of the sign, thanks to the senses. As such, it is concluded that the definitions analyzed in the present text form part of that which may be represented. In this sense, the rhetorical figure makes language more complex, and distances itself from concrete messages. However, despite this, said language becomes ingenious, and may have much greater repercussions, if well-implemented. It highlights and enhances the meaning or beauty of a concept.

The qualisign is among all existing signs. It occurs when this sign obtains its form and structure, but still cannot be officially called a sign. Its relationship with metaphors or substitutional semes lies in its participation as the basis of all representation, and both metaphors and substitutional semes represent language.

A substitutional seme is the transcription of one language to another medium. Its relationship with other concepts occurs as this is the last stage in the communication of an idea, and the basis for a metaphor as an interpretative idea. This is the rational part, that only a human being may completely comprehend.

A metaphor is the representation of an idea or context, by way of another of these, when a certain amount of proximity in meaning is maintained. Its affinity to substitutional semes and qualisign is based on the fact that metaphors can explain them both. At any time, they may be explained, via metaphor, and used within themselves to bolster logic. Below, qualisigns are examined, in certain scenes from the movie.

### Scene 1



Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bFBB8Yo7yu0>

In this sign, we observe the most characteristic *substitutional seme* in the entire Batman world. He is the so-called hero, the representative of a better future for Gotham City. The Batman logo is beamed into the sky. In the midst of the darkness, there are beams of light that return hope. The calls occur for a bad reason, and, as the perfect accompaniment for the situation, they occur on a pitch black, starless night, typical of the city. In this particular case, the mafia's bank robbery failed, because information was filtered to the capos. The direct intervention of Batman, the town representative, is necessary.

### Scene 2



Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZhSqGupieog>

In this situation in the movie, the way in which the Joker interrupts a party to evoke his qualisign, and make it into a sinssign is shown. As he wanders the aisles of the hall, he begins to tell his tragic tale. He started by mentioning his father, when he sees one attendee. "You remind me of my father. I hated my father". This conversation is stopped

by Rachel Dawes, who says that enough is enough. The Joker approaches her calmly, while she reminds him that she is Two Face's sweetheart. With her reaction to his approach, the Joker comments, "You look nervous. Is it because of my scars?" At that time, the Joker's face is a qualisign, due to its form, but this lacks context, and so cannot, yet, be called a sign. The Joker begins a monologue: "I had a wife, she was beautiful like you. She said that I worried too much, and should smile more. She gambled, and one day, the loan sharks cut her face. We didn't have money for surgeries, and I couldn't stand it. I just wanted her to smile again. So, I stuck a knife in my mouth and did this". Then, he moves his face from side to side, showing his scar, which extends from ear to ear. Finally, he comments, "Now, I'm always smiling", finalizing with his habitual qualisign, which should have been in doubt, and places a partly-structured, although there are comments that the story about his smile is more involved.

### Scene 3



Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g3dl32LaOIs>

Scene 3 shows a mafia meeting after salvaging funds from a bank robbery. This is interrupted by the Joker, who is both demanding and confident that all will go as he plans. His entrance reflects the adjectives above. "How about a magic trick? I'm going to make this pencil disappear". Next, he bangs the head of one of the mafiosos who attacks him directly onto the pencil on the table. The pencil disappears into his head. Cue the storm of *metaphors*.

"Let's wind the clock back a year. Those cops and lawyers wouldn't dare cross any of you. I mean, what happened? Did your balls drop off?". "I know why you choose to hold your, ahem, "group therapy sessions" in broad daylight". He uses this entrance to demonstrate the position of his receptors. Things have changed, and they no longer hold the power they did

before. “Batman has shown Gotham City his true colors, unfortunately. Dent? This is just the beginning”. He begins to explain what is happening, and why criminals are in crisis. “Batman has no jurisdiction. He’ll find you and make you squeal. I recognize snitches when I see them”. He warns that the protector of the illicit money can guarantee them nothing. No border stops Batman, if it is for the good of Gotham City. “If you’re good at something, never do it free” is his response when they ask why he has not yet killed Batman, as they propose.

“If we don’t deal with this now, this small gambler from here won’t be able to take even five cents from his grandma”. He continues to exert his position of authority and confidence. The mafia will have to cede to his pretension or will continue to be picked off. “Let’s not blow this out of proportion”, he emphasizes, when his words are poorly received by the top criminals, who want to kill the Joker right there, as he keeps the pins for various grenades hidden in his suit. He leaves his card, for them to contact him, and leaves, walking backward and threatening to pull the pin in his hand.

These forms of sign representation form part, not only of a saga of superhero films, but which are easily identified in daily life. Men use substitutional semes to communicate, as they are mute, metaphors to explain communication to students, and the qualisign of those which form an idea in their heads and are not implemented. Generally, these forms of expression also apply for non-dramatized situations.

Another relationship between these three terms is that they form part of a communication process: *qualisign* evokes the idea to be communicated, substitutional semes generate the channel by which the information may be transported, and metaphors are the final result of said message.

The emphasis generated through the use of rhetorical figures has become vital for the arguments of audiovisual products. It is odd, however, that these are employed in a given production, as despite their constant presence, few are able to use them such that they would seem strictly necessary to the script, as in the case of *The Dark Knight*. Said movie, without them, would have had much less impact on the audience, and the story would not represent such intense meanings as it does.

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