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**Lecturer:** Paul Hills  
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**Title of essay assignment:**

Write a critical analysis concerning your production of your 5 minute documentary.

I hereby declare that this essay is my own work. I have acknowledged all other authors' ideas and referenced direct quotations from their work. I have not allowed anyone else to borrow or copy my work.

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Jans (C.J.) de Jager

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Date

When critically analysing “Trance Life” there are various film theories which can be used to make meaning of the piece. “Trance Life” is aimed at introducing trance music and along-going culture for the first time to the viewer. It is possible to interrogate the construction of the piece in the light of semiotic analysis and models of interpretation. By analysing the arrangement of signs it is possible to make certain assumptions about how the piece could be read and who the reader is and who is included in the intended audience.

When considering the semiotic analysis of this film we must first understand the photograph frame as a sign. According to renowned semiologist Roland Barthes (1977:15) the photograph is a “message” with a sender, mode of communication, and receiver. It is further argued that the photograph is “a message without a code” (Barthes 1977:17). This could mean that the reader does not need a repertoire of linguistic knowledge (in the case of a foreign language) or special technical knowledge (in the case of a sheet of music) to decode the encoding. Anyone can extract some meaning from the message by just looking at it. “Trance Life” is also constructed without a secret code with the intention of introducing the subject matter to the audience. There is no specific jargon that is used that would limit the audience to people who’ve been to a trance party. The codes that are in use conform to documentary style of semiotic construction.

Following on this argument, it must be realised that television and film are made up of series of photographic frames, as well as scenes, cuts and sound bites. For a “real event” to be broadcast its material specificities needs to be encoded to the “institutional structures of broadcasting, with their practices and networks of production, their organised relations and technical infrastructures, [that] are required to produce a programme” (Hall 1995:92). “Trance Life” is also the product of infrastructure constraints, the need to conform to the television journalism course and the need to make sense to the viewer. It is made up of interviews, cutaway visual material, and music which conspire to have the viewer ask questions to itself about the presented facts. Thus it could be feasible to argue that the piece is indeed made up of codes which are decoded by the reader who is seasoned by the tele-visual standards of production.

A distinction must be made between the observations of the viewer and the intentions of the author. For the viewer “Trance Life” denotes a certain meaning (or “denotation” which refers to the interpretation), but for the producer it may connote a different “coded” meaning (or “connotation” which refers to the intended meaning)

(Barthes 1977:19). This can be done through the use of “trick effects”, “pose”, “objects”, “photogenia”, “aestheticism” and “syntax” (Barthes 1977:21-25). The use of effects in “Trance Life” adds to a feeling of fluidity and distortion that is usually associated with trance music. Most of the shot compositions feature full-body wide shots which suggest a feeling of distance which simulates tunnel vision. Props and decoration which were included in the piece included art and flyers which represented the interview subjects. The “embellished” photogenic (Barthes 1977:23) effect adds to the presentation of a situation where “the connoted meaning is the image itself”. So too, an “aestheticism” (Barthes 1977:24) used in the design of interviews and visuals presents itself to the reader as visually appealing “art” (Barthes 1977:24). The “syntax” (Barthes 1977:24), or way the shots are placed in relation to each other shapes the narrative to the reader.

At this point we can ask ourselves who the reader and main audience are. Semiologist Umberto Eco focuses on the decoding function by the audience by proposing that a “closed text” offers the reader a variety of interpretations (Eco 1984:8). While writing (or filming and editing) the author or producers “foresee a model of the possible reader (hereafter Model Reader)” (Eco 1984:7). In the case of “Trance Life” this model reader makes up the audience who knows very little about it. For this reason it could well be called an “open text” (Eco 1984:9) because it dictates to the reader about particular facts and themes instead of offering an open interpretation. It could be argued that all television news broadcasts are open texts because they dictate facts and figures in colloquial language which a large group of people can understand. “Semantic disclosures” (Eco 1984:23) in open texts may also well offer the reader fewer “inferential walks” (Eco 1984:31) where gaps in the text has to be imagined or filled in by the reader.

While all of these considerations are based on the construction of signs in the text, they lead invariably to the psychoanalysis of the relation between the reader and the text. The “subject/object relationship” (Fourie 2004:227) theories are based loosely on Sigmund Freud’s psychological theories of the subconscious. Viewers could be said to be experiencing psychological enjoyment of the film through identification with events and feelings of the portrayed character signs (Fourie 2004:228). Through observing and immersing themselves in the inferential walks in the textual construction of the signs, the readers’ emotions are triggered (Fourie 2004:230) and their experience of it

corresponds with the disempowered tunnel-vision experience of having a dream (Fourie 2004:232).

And thus, while analysing this piece it is clear that even in 5 minutes time much can be communicated with the viewer. If the viewer is informed by the workings of signs and how they are interpreted and made meaning of by different readers, more value can be gathered from watching the piece.

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