

## **“Football is Never Only Football”: Semiotic Analysis of the Film ‘Looking for Eric’**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Football, which is an important part of daily life in almost every society in our day, has progressed in similar periods with the cinema. These two fields, which were among the important actors of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, existed in daily life through their various intersecting aspects, and these similarities provided a ground for the cinema to be nourished by football. Football has functioned far beyond just being a game within social life and turned into a highly important area at both cultural and economic levels through the bond it has formed with the symbolic values of daily life. The influence of football on masses is too big to be ignored. Offering a hero to individuals isolated by modern life with whom they can identify themselves, great joys experienced when the ball meets the net, and a sense of belonging to the team they support and to people they do not know, football is an activity that has achieved goals far beyond being a game. Together with the Second World War, football gradually became more professional, more commercialized, and the football spectator alienated from football, which was an important part of his life. With the development of the phenomenon of being a supporter, football followers regained their existence in football and managed to exist within a collectivity.

In the present study, the relationship between football and social life, and the phenomenon of being a supporter are examined through the film *Looking for Eric*, which is among the important films of Ken Loach’s cinema. The film narrates how the life of a postman who has strong feelings of support for his team and who looks for hope for his bad life changes for the better when his most favorite footballer comes into his life and how the experiences in a football field can be put into practice in real life. Playfields in which a reproduction in the public sense springs to life, especially the stadiums, once again appear in front of us with this film as the proof of that “football is never only football”. What makes the film different from other football-themed films is the use of a

real football star, and that the film constructs a narrative through the relationship between life and football presenting true slices of the footballer's life and achievements in the football field.

**Keywords:** Cinema, Football, Social Life

## **INTRODUCTION**

In this study, Ken Loach's film *Looking for Eric* will be analyzed by using Greimas's actantial model, which is a method of semiotic analysis. The film is analyzed on the narrative level based on Greimas's model; divided into sections according to the actants model, and real life and football are each discussed as different sections. The events that take place in the film are arranged into a table within the context of the relationships among actants. Actions are presented based on the table of actants. The analysis of the film using the actantial model suggested by Greimas showed that, like other types of narrative, the film had actants of sender, object, subject, opponent, receiver, and helper. These findings justify Greimas's suggestion that non-linguistic signs should also be investigated in semiotic analysis. Its application to this model developed by cinematic narrative shows that the film is a case that can be discussed at the textual level.

Extending beyond being merely a football film, *Looking for Eric* includes numerous messages regarding real life. Eric Cantona, who is a real football star, is one of the leading heroes of the film and scenes from his life are presented in the film. He helps Eric Bishop, who suffers a midlife crisis, to attain a better life and solve his problems by applying his achievements in the football field to the troubles in Bishop's life. In the film, an analogy is drawn between the ideas that an individual always has numerous choices, one needs to trust friends, and success cannot be achieved alone but is possible through solidarity, and a football match. The director adds his own interpretation to the film with the idea that football is not only football, but has parallels with real life. At the same time, the case of industrial football, how football turned into a tool of entertainment for the rich, and expensive ticket prices are also depicted in the film.

## **FOOTBALL-SOCIETY-CINEMA RELATIONSHIP**

Football is defined as a human activity that takes place at a certain place and time, and under certain conditions (Erdoğan, 2008, p.2). Sport, having existed in every society and carried out certain functions all along, has become an important part of the society in the last century. At such a position, it seems impossible for football not to have connection with the social structure and the other concepts existing in life (Kazaz, 2007,p.46-47).

While studying football in this paper, the point of emphasis is not when football emerged, but from which human needs it arose, its purpose, and what its consequences brought to the society. The reason behind the emergence of football is the desire for self-realization held by a group that arose while some were living their lives, or the wish of this group to meet their relational needs among wide social structures. In addition to these needs, cases like celebrating success, starting a relationship, achieving sovereignty, the wish to create a new structure, competition, and the desire for struggle are also among other reasons for the emergence of football. While being played, watched and talked about, football goes beyond being only a theatrical game and establishes and maintains relationships; reproduces itself; rebuilds us and them. Football, which performs both an economic and an ideological task, reproduces class and gender differences in the society. It differentiates getting pleasure by procurement; functions as a discharge for the audience (Erdođan, 2008, p.4-10).

With the popularization of football, numerous individuals have wanted to watch the game as much as to play it. As it became a means of entertainment and socialization, the phenomena of industrial football and being a supporter have positioned in two different directions. Expensive tickets, sponsorships, advertising, star players, and transfers are like the previews of this variation in football. Within commercialized football, being a supporter is different from the industrialized form of football in terms of its unique existence, language, and culture. The concept of supportership brings along collectivity. It requires existing in networks of connection beyond passivity such as being at the same stadium on the days of matches and watching the same game. The connection network is the collective memory, collective attitudes, and the 'public space' in which a supporter exists together with the other supporters. The sense of belonging to the football club has gone beyond supporting the team and created a sense of collective belonging (Aydın, Hatipođlu, Ceyhan, 2008, p.293-300). In our day, a supporter is perceived as a customer. The sense of belonging is among the reasons that push individuals to perform social and mass movements. Since the use of sport as a means to realize this state of belonging has been rendered possible, sport has gained a significant function in favor of socialization. Opportunities of communication and interaction offered by sport among individuals and masses, even masses that are fairly strangers to each other, reinforces this function of sport.

Factors such as social status and life standards which individuals have within the society determine the tribunes where they are required to sit, and even the seat of each individual in the tribunes at sports matches. For example, at a football match the social status and life standards of the individuals sitting in the bleachers are different from

those who are sitting at the grandstand (Kazaz, 2007, Kaya, 2001). In this period when football is no longer football, it presents itself to us as a business area. In these times, in which talking about football also means talking about the values dominated by money, the effect of football on the formation of the consumerist society should not be ignored (Talimciler, 2008, p.94). Alongside football followers, today some big companies also play a role in the transfers of star football players. As the result of advertisement and sponsorship contracts, footballers turn up the team they admire and choose the teams that will provide them commercial benefits (Çiftçi, 2015). The team which is regarded as the most important representative of industrial football in the world is the English football team Manchester United. The 500 million-dollar merchandising and sponsorship contract signed for 13 years with Nike instead of Umbro in 2002 is one of the most important events in the history of industrial football (Talimciler, 2008,p.94). Slices from the life of a real Manchester United player, Eric Cantona, are presented in the film analyzed in this study. The other leading character of the film is Eric Bishop, who is a keen supporter of Manchester United. It is significant that the director voices his criticisms of industrial football through the two leading actors associated with Manchester United. In this sense, the film is selected as sample assuming that it would enable obtaining findings for understanding the place of football in social life and the point it has reached.

A review of the relationship between football and cinema shows that both of these domains which lead masses progress on a parallel line. The point where cinema and football coincides is the fact that both are entirely within life. Several directors identify life exactly with football; it becomes inevitable for the cinema, which is nourished by life, to interact with football. The film *'The Winning Goal'*, which was shot in England in 1920, entered the history of world cinema as the first film about football and formed the first example for cinema being nourished by football (Gürçay, 2008, p.435-436). *'Volver A Vivir'* (1967), *'Two Half-Times in Hell'* (1962), *'Escape To Victory'* (1981), *'Hors la vie'* (1991), *'O Que É Isso, Companheiro?'* (1996), *'Beautiful People'* (1999), *'The Year My Parents Went on Vacation'* (2006), and *'Dar Alanda Kısa Paslaşmalar'* (2000) are examples of important and pioneering films through which football is depicted in the cinema. Offering cinematic narratives by changing the discourses of social life in a particular way, cinema could not keep away from football, which has gained an important place within the cultural system. In our day, football has meanings far beyond being a game. Meeting of football with the cinema has undoubtedly revealed the power of these two fields, which lead huge masses behind.

## **ANALYSIS OF THE FILM LOOKING FOR ERIC**

### **Sample and Method**

Ken Loach's film *Looking for Eric* (2009) has an important place in that it embodies various elements of the classical Ken Loach cinema although seems to be slighter compared to the other films of the director. The director, who generally sets stories in his films in the context of class conflicts, capitalism, and modernity, chose a star footballer as the basis of his story in this film. Emphasizing the solidarity aspect of football beyond its competitiveness, the film criticizes the understanding that sees the supporters as customers by establishing the connection between football and real life. The most basic point the movie presents is that football has meanings far beyond being a game and literally coincides with real life. *Looking for Eric* was selected as sample based on the assumption that it would be possible to obtain findings regarding football-themed cinema.

In the study, the film *Looking for Eric* is analyzed by using Greimas's actantial model in order to examine the connection between football and real life. Before starting the analysis, the social background of football and its relationship with the cinema are briefly mentioned within the theoretical framework.

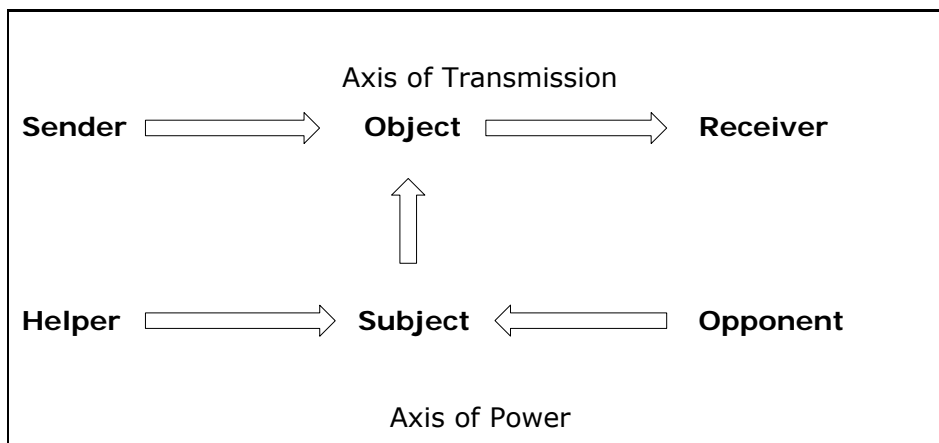
Before starting the analysis, examining Greimas and the perspective he brought to semiotics would be useful in terms of understanding the reason for selecting this method and the conducted analysis. As many other linguists, Greimas played a pioneer role in the development of semiotics. Greimas's studying semiotics as a search for meaning formed the basis for the modern-day understanding of semiotics (Parsa and Parsa, 2012, p.4-5). Greimas, who established a structural understanding of semiotics, focused on the semantic analysis of textual structures through emphasizing abstract realities. When studying a text, he analyzed the meaning of the text by defining the structural relationships between the discursive elements based on the surface structure of the text rather than examining the signs one by one. Greimas stated that there exists a common semantic axis that reveals the meaning in all texts. The levels that constitute the semantic axis in the text can be listed as follows.

1. Basic Semantic Dimension: This is the deepest structure and involves contradictions.
2. Basic Semantic Dimension and Syntactic Narrative Dimension: This is the deep structure of the text, and deals with the basic contradictions in life.
3. Syntactic Narrative Dimension and Superficial Dimension: This is the structure of the text and settlement turns into an individual work of art (Erkman and Akerson, 2005, p.149).

Greimas states that a narrative is composed of three main layers from base to surface. These are named as figurative, narrative and thematic levels. At the figurative level, the characters in the narrative are presented through their functions in time and space and the signs in the text are matched. At the narrative level, the characters of the narrative are analyzed. At this level, we meet Greimas's actants model. According to Günay, the relationship between the sender, object, and the receiver, the interaction between the subject and the object, the axis of transmission between the sender and the object, and lastly the axis of power between the helper, subject, and opponent are important depending on the interaction among the actants. The subject is in relationship with all actants (2007, p.195). Greimas's actantial model is composed of a sender (determines the action), object, receiver (the person for whom the action is being performed), helper (who assists the action), subject (who performs the action), and opponent (who hinders the action). He thinks that these actants constitute the narrative in every text (Parsa and Parsa, 2012, p.90).

The development of Greimas's actantial model was inspired by Propp. Based on Propp's 31 folktale functions, Greimas reduced the number of functions first to 20 and then to 4 basic elements. He turned the actions into six actants and presented the relationships among these actants as shown in the table below (Gündeş, 2003, p.56).

Table 1: Greimas's Actantial Model



Subject: Performs the action.

Object: is the goal of the action.

Sender: is the case that determines and lies at the origin of the action.

Receiver: is the person who receives the effects and the results of the action and for whom the action is performed.

Helper: is the element that assists the action.

Opponent: is the one who hinders the action (Gündeş, 2003, p.57).

Greimas reduced the actions into six actants and formed the list below by combining these actants with each other in pairs (Kıran and Kıran, 2000, 216):

1. The axis of desire: Contrariness of the subject and the object.
2. The axis of transmission: Contrariness of the sender and the receiver.
3. The axis of power: Contrariness of the helper and the opponent.

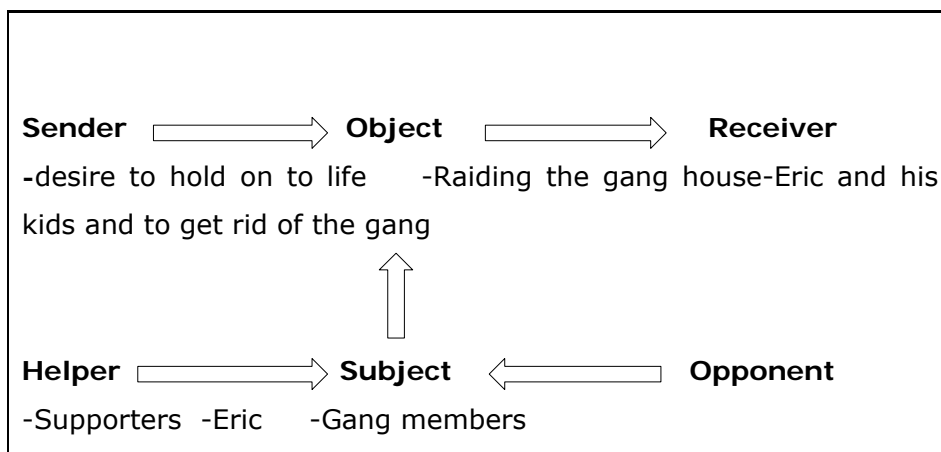
Greimas considers the actants on four semantic axes by connecting them through the interactions among each other. While the relationship between the sender, object, and the receiver forms the axis of transmission, the interaction between the subject and the object forms the axis of desire, and the relationship between the sender and the object forms the axis of transmission. The axis of transmission indicates that the sender needs to transmit something to another person or the object, or again the sender needs the object. The axis of desire enables that the subject overcomes all the obstacles and the object reaches the receiver. The axis of power represents the level on which the subject is capable of performing the action that he takes from desiring to doing. The element that provides this power to the subject is the helper. The opponent is a negative force that makes the action of the subject difficult. These axes also present the relationship among the actants. The subject has a relationship with almost all the actants. To state clearly, every actants chart is formed according to the subject. The change of the subject also means the change of the actants chart (Günay, 2007, p.195). All elements of the actantial model may not be together. Six actants are seen together in some narratives, whereas a few of them could be present in some others (Yücel, 1999, p.120-121). The relationship between two actants presents the elementary utterance, and the elementary utterance is separated into two as utterance of state and utterance of doing.

### **Looking for Eric**

*Looking for Eric (2009)* narrates the events that occur in the life of Eric Bishop, a postman who suffers from panic attack. Eric is a Manchester United fanatic and never misses a match of his team. Having separated from his beloved wife, he lives in the same house with his two stepsons. Not being able to get his life on track in any way, he goes through an unhappy stage. His daughter from his first wife Lily asks her father to look after her baby so that she can work on the thesis she needs to write to finish her school. Eric goes to take the baby from his ex-wife Lily. When he meets Lily after years, he realizes what he has lost. While trying to recover from the sadness he has fallen into, he remembers when he last felt happy. The last time he felt himself happy was a Manchester United Match, which was Cantona's comeback game. Eric starts to see Eric Cantona, whose picture he has in his room and who he believes is the most fantastic center-forward of the world, in his hallucinations as his alter-ego. The footballer starts to give Eric advice on

his life associating it with his achievements in the football field. Owing to these episodes, Eric faces Lily. Another thing that does not go well in Eric’s life is his stepsons getting into trouble. He struggles against his stepsons who bring home the things they steal and behave irresponsibly. His elder son Ryan is recruited to join a gang by a gang leader in return for a match ticket. Their house gets raided by the police when Ryan brings home a gun used in an injury case. Eric, who tries to get rid of the gun, gets beaten up when he goes to see the gang leader, and the images of the beating are broadcast on YouTube. Following Cantona’s suggestion, the postman collaborates with his supporter friends. They raid the house of the mafia leader together with the three busloads of supporters going to FC United’s match-the team which was founded as a response to the purchase of Manchester United by American businessmen. All wear Cantona masks on their faces and name the organization they formed as “Operation Cantona”. They shoot their paint guns at the gang members and turn their house upside down. They threaten them with uploading the video they made on YouTube and in this way they get rid of the gun. Thus, they also manage to overcome this problem in solidarity owing to Cantona’s suggestion. The most remarkable aspect of the film is the appearance of Cantona an actor, who is a real football star. Cantona is a player who is known not only for his success in football, but also for his philosophical character. He quit football when he was at the top of his career and lived as a law unto himself. His decision of quitting football was caused by the fact that money had taken precedence over everything in football. As much as the youth of our day admire Messi, Ronaldo, and Ronaldinho, football fans whose age is over thirty-five would remember Cantona.

Table 2: Section 1: Events based on Eric Bishop’s point of view and as experienced in real life

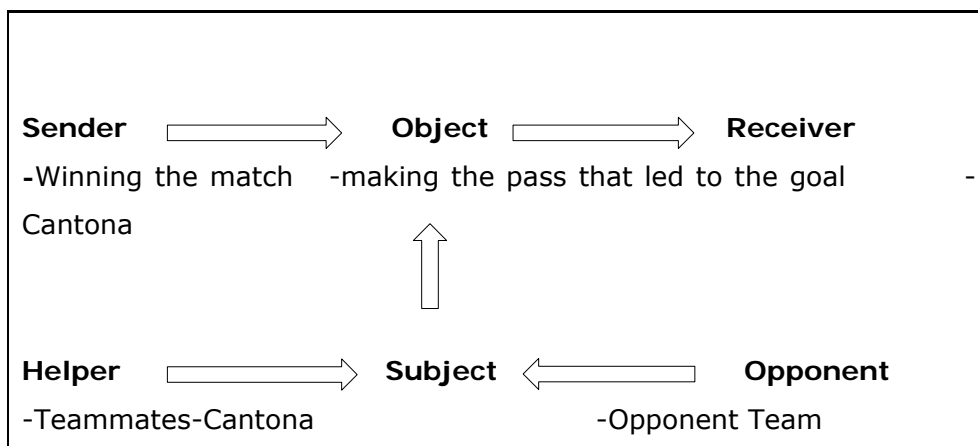


We can symbolize the actants as Subject= $S_1$ , Object= $O_1$ , Sender= $SR_1$ , Receiver= $R_1$ , Helper= $H_1$ , Opponent= $OP_1$ , and Narrative Program= $NP_1$ . In the first section, the protagonist of the story is Eric. The value object of  $S_1$  is the desire to raid the gang



leader's house and to save his son from trouble. While the person who at the same time will benefit from the action is  $S_1$ , the one who hinders  $S_1$  is  $OP_1$ . The parties who play the role of helper actants help Eric and teach the gang members a lesson. The actants seen in the diagram above present the connections between the units of a narrative. On the axis of transmission that goes along the line of sender, object, and receiver, the subject takes action to transmit something to the receiver. The axis of transmission in the diagram above is formed by Eric's raiding the house of the gang members to realize himself in life and save his kids from trouble. On the axis of desire, which is the axis between the subject and the object, the gang members acting as opponents first resist and then surrender. A change is observed between the start and the conclusion of the action. Eric defeats the gang members, whom he believes he cannot beat, by collaborating with his friends. The three busloads of supporters going to FC United's match carry the feelings of solidarity beyond watching a match and help their supporter friend through the solidarity they have among each other.

Table 3: Section 2: Events based on Eric Cantona's point of view and as experienced on the football field



On the axis of transmission, the value object of the sender for  $S_1$  is Cantona's desire to win and to score goals in every match he plays.  $S_1$  wants to achieve  $O_1$ . The person who at the same time will benefit from the action is  $S_1$ . This inclination from the subject to the object forms the axis of desire. In this section,  $OP_1$  hinders  $S_1$ ;  $H_1$  assists  $S_1$ ;  $H_1$  plays the role of helper actant. On the axis of transmission that goes along the line of sender, object, and receiver, the subject takes action to transmit something to the receiver. In the diagram above, on the axis of transmission Cantona's teammates help him to win the match and stand by him against the opponent team. Cantona trusts his teammates and passes the ball thinking that they can turn the passed ball into a goal. The subject reaches the value object at the end of the narrative. This is the narrative that the film constructs between life and football and the real message it wants to give to the viewer.

The pass that leads to the goal and the solidarity among the team are more important than scoring the goal. Cantona says that a person has more than one choice at his most difficult time, and believing that the pass he sends will lead to a goal and trusting his friends will lead him to success. The idea that union makes strength comes true in both Cantona's life on the football field and when Eric gets rid of the trouble he goes through. In a dialogue between Cantona and Eric, Cantona says that the most important moment of his life is not scoring a goal but a pass he made. Eric gets highly surprised, because he thinks that moment would be about scoring a goal. When Eric asks Cantona "What if he'd missed?" Cantona replies "You have to trust your teammates, always. If not, we are lost". Here, the pass is described as an action that also includes the rest of the team into the game. In fact, the same idea resolves the issues in Eric's life. Working as a team and struggling together solves all of his problems. In this sense, *Looking for Eric* is a film which praises the success achieved through passing the ball rather than scoring a goal, i.e. solidarity. The director takes a different approach to football and emphasizes that it is a game beyond sending the ball to the goal and it is more important to collaborate and enjoy the game. The same case prevails when Eric goes to the house of the gang members. The use of paint spraying guns rather than real guns and the Cantona masks worn by all supporters indicate that the fellow supporters also enjoyed themselves when teaching a lesson to the gang members. In a line from the film, Cantona once again reminds that there is always another way by saying "If they are faster than you, don't try to outrun them. If they are taller, don't outjump them. If they are stronger on the left, you go right. To surprise them, you've got to surprise yourself first".

At the same time, the film includes a criticism of industrial football. In the dialogue between Cantona and Eric, it is expressed that football has obviously become a tool of entertainment for the upper class by looking at the cars parked at the lots of stadiums. Sponsorship contracts, broadcasting rights, and transfer fees are the most important indicators of the perception of industrial football, which is not at all compatible with the feeling of being a supporter. In a discussion among friends, one of the supporters places supporting the team above everything by saying "you can change your wife, change your politics, change your religion. But never, never can you change your favorite football team!" At the same time, this is another way of saying that the supporters who gave up Manchester United against its new American owners and formed FC United still sympathize with their old flame.

## **CONCLUSION**

Ken Loach's film *Looking for Eric* involves meanings beyond being merely a football film or narrating the life of a real football star. It shows what can be achieved by applying the

team spirit of the football field to real life. The director has proven that football is not a ball and a stadium full of supporters. The necessity of embracing football, that football is appreciated only by means of a supporters' culture, otherwise there is no other way of valuing the team, are among the messages of the film. The film draws a resemblance between being able to manage to be the team in the football field, taking risks, not giving up, and standing out till the last moment, and real life. Besides, what arises as an important tenet is that trusting life always comes up with results.

In the study, the narrative level of the film

*Looking for Eric* was examined by using the actantial model developed by Greimas. In the analysis of the film, first the narrative was discussed from two different perspectives as life and football. It was seen that the syntagmatically presented plot line, narrative level, and thematic level constituted the surface structure of the text in the film. The study exhibited the presence of the actants of sender, receiver, subject, object, opponent, and helper in the film. It was discovered that both professional and real lives of both characters had a system and integrity within itself. Cantona's farewell to football at the peak of his career and Eric's heaving a sigh of relief from his midlife crisis and getting his life back on track are among the analogous indicators of the film. That both characters of the film are good in their own areas is another parallel narrative constructed by the director. While Eric is the star of the dance floors, Cantona is the star of the football fields. At the end of the film, Eric, who begins to look at life with hope, also starts to wear his blue dance shoes.

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