

READING SIGNS IN FILMS THROUGH BARTHES' SEMIOTICS

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Abstract

Discussions on films cannot be separated from their roles as media of entertainment as well as learning. Thus, film is significant to be studied as a research object. One of the approaches commonly used to interpret films is semiotics. This study focuses on how semiotic theory is applied or used to observe and interpret signs in films and its use to help people such as students, lectures, etc., especially those who intend to deepen their knowledge in humanities films. By collecting reference sources relevant to films and semiotics from journals and books as data, the results of this literature study explained that films can be interpreted by applying Barthes' semiotic theory in a way that elements in films such as scenes, plots, dialogs, characters, etc. were observed to show signifiers, signified and sign. The results of discussion also suggested that the semiotic approach generally considers or treats all phenomena as signs that can represent or create a meaning through understanding myths and connotations.

Keywords: *films, signs, semiotics, theory, myths*

INTRODUCTION

One of the activities that people often do in their daily lives is watching films (movies). Rapid technological development has made film one of the entertainment media people seek the most (Rudy, 2022). It can be enjoyed by people of all ages and social backgrounds. Every time popular Hollywood film production companies release a new film, the public is always enthusiastic to watch it. Besides, various kinds of genres such as action, detective, horror, science-fiction, drama, and animation make films a fascinating and satisfying source of entertainment for many people. As a means of entertainment, film can give pleasure and satisfaction to its audience. Thus, it is not surprising that the phenomenon of lining up for movie tickets is often seen in cinemas, especially at the premiers of famous films such as the sequels of *Harry Potter*, *The X-Men*, *Fantastic Four*, *Black Panthers*, *The Conjuring*, *Insidious*, *Fast and Furious*, etc. However, on the other hand, it also plays another important role in society.

The presence of films can bring changes in various aspects of society because they can impact people's lives. Various social and cultural issues or phenomena have become something that is inseparable from human life. Every individual never seems to be able to hide from economic, social, political, and cultural influences in society. These all can be pictured in films. They show views that come from various experiences of human life (Carmona, 2017). One of the fields that has had a significant influence is education, as it can broaden people's mindsets (Adi, 2011). Education and film are closely connected. Since film is growing, the world of education has also changed.

Film is necessary for various learning and teaching activities in formal or non-formal educational institutions. This can actually benefit students because they can get something to learn from watching movies. Films can actually be used to gain knowledge (Rudy, Hutabarat & Samosir, 2022). It is also why films have become the source of knowledge and information and have been used in many kinds of humanities studies. Besides that, in the world of psychology, for instance, films can also be used as media to study the behavior or attitude of an individual (Córtes, 2000). Since films

are close to society and have many functions, they are frequently used in learning, especially for students from media literature and cultural studies.

Because films are studied, it is also necessary to relate the film studying to theories frequently applied for analysis or interpretation. There are many approaches that one can choose. One of the well-known theories that is often used to interpret literary works or cultural phenomena is semiotics. It is also an important theory in cultural sciences. Semiotics was chosen for discussion because of its specificity in interpreting signs or symbols. According to Kalelioglu (2017), semiotics can enter all types of scientific fields and have a wide range to explain both written and unwritten signs, even though the topic of semiotics in the humanities is not something new. There are a number of studies that have been reviewed, such as research from Tomaselli (1981), Mudjiono (2011), Mudjiyanto & Nur (2013), Kalelioglu (2017), and Wulansari et al. (2020), which concentrate on the history, figures, and the basic understanding of semiotics. However, these research articles have not fully focused on Barthes' semiotic theory and how it is used in studying films.

Therefore, to discuss further about film and semiotics, this research emphasizes explaining how semiotic theory plays a role in studying films. A study about films and their relation to semiotics can be used to contribute to theory development, especially in cultural studies, literature, education, and so on. Besides, it is also helpful as a reference source for other researchers who will discuss films or semiotics in the future.

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative research is considered a descriptive literature review. In other words, to carry out this study, it is necessary to collect as many reference sources as possible (especially journal articles and books) to explain the objects discussed in this study. This type of study can also be classified as library research because both involve the collection of literary sources, and according to Giarruso et al. (1994) and Hasan (2002) aim to collect as much information as possible from various literature to answer the research question. Thus, the data required is in the form of texts acquired from different kinds of reference sources to solve the problem formulated in the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Film as the Object of Research

The brief explanation of film that has been mentioned in the previous section leads to more specific matters regarding films. The term "film" discussed in this study tends to refer to works of art that aim to entertain and play a role as media to be studied for academic purposes. For this reason, the discussion does not cover the process of making films or things related to film creation techniques, but rather, the definition of film in the realm of arts, entertainment media, knowledge, and research. The discussion also explains the semiotic theory and its application to film studies.

Basic discussion on films must begin by finding out the meaning of the term "film". This study, of course, does not intend to present all definitions of film. However, there are several definitions that have been gathered to serve as a reference to compile a definition of film. Film is a creative man-made product involving sound, music, motion, and technology to create a form of audio-visual work (Imanto, 2007). The film, according to Cloete Field (2017), can actually be perceived as a kind of creative art that is entertaining, fictional, and realistic. In addition, Nascimento (2019) argued that the films people watch can reflect the idea that fiction created in films is not only a story shown on a film screen but can also portray some reality in life.

Many issues and phenomena encountered in everyday life are used as themes for films of various genres. So, in general, this study arranged a simple definition of film as an audio-visual entertainment medium that involves proper technology to make the settings, characters, sounds, movements, and colors better to amaze the audience. There are

many kinds of film genres; according to Bondebjerg Field (2015), in general, film genres that are often known as classic Hollywood film genres include comedy, horror, melodrama, science-fiction, action, musical, and crime, which also has categories such as detective, police, thriller, and gangster. Even though the film is designed in a fictional form, many historical events are used as themes by filmmakers, which can attract people's attention to find out about the history. They are called historical dramas. Several popular American movies, for example, *Pearl Harbor*, *Titanic*, *The Patriot*, and *9/11*. Another genre is called biographical films such as *Malcolm X*, *Oppenheimer*, *Lincoln*, and *The King's Speech*, telling historical events. If it was not made into a film, perhaps many people would not know about the historical events.

What is interesting about films is that they can be studied in various ways based on the researcher's field of study (Isboli, 2017). The study of films has long been carried out by researchers from various points of view regarding the history, narratives, actors, production companies, technology, etc. (Turner, 2003). Since Hollywood film production has developed rapidly, the film has been seriously considered a work of art and a socio-cultural trend, particularly for researchers of new generations in the humanities (Schatz, 2014). This means of entertainment is not only fictional stories created to fulfill the public desires. It can actually pave the way for people to figure out something significant. In relation to the various types of film genres mentioned above, people are free to watch whatever genre they prefer. Whatever genre they choose can inform students, academics, writers, observers, and researchers about culture and society.

Popular culture observers and researchers, for example, would see public taste for the movies as significant data. As a popular culture product, films play an essential role as indicators of people's interest in something. Therefore, researchers from the field of humanities view films as a source of data that holds a lot of information. Apart from understanding that film is an entertainment medium that is included in popular culture, the film may also be perceived as a literary work. If a film is seen as a literary product, it can be considered a text, and what plays a significant role in a text is language. This point shows that film and language are closely connected. Abrams et al. (2001) has stated that film is essentially a medium involving language to narrate a story. Words, both written and spoken in the field of linguistics are not something simple. Words have various meanings, interpretations, positions, etc. These all can also be found in films. University students from the language department, for instance, can analyze many aspects of language in movies, such as the use of figurative words, language styles, slang, and many more interesting parts that can be explored regarding language in films based on the researcher's interest.

Researchers from the history department might be interested in historical films or documentaries that tell historical events in their societies or the world. Likewise, historians who prefer comparing conditions from one era to another may also use movies as research material. Researchers from linguistics can also examine linguistic aspects of film dialogs. Dialogs in films can be considered an essential text for linguists as study material. Cartoon movies, for instance, according to Nurjanah et al. (2018) can have an impact on language acquisition among children. It proves that researchers can use movies to identify linguistic problems. Films can be used as a worthy study even in terms of language teaching. In discourse analysis, which is often seen as one of the important studies in linguistics, films also play an essential role in forming ideology or social views (Goziyah et al., 2018). Therefore, films can be a rich data source for those who intend to research linguistics.

People who study psychology, for instance, can also analyze films to identify issues or trends in society related to psychology. Things that are often discussed in psychology, such as behavioral patterns, a person's mentality, mental problems, and depression, can also be found in films. Rudy et al. (2022), for example, stated that the film *Bohemian Rhapsody* is an interesting and significant source of data for exploring the issue of self-discovery related to psychology. Many researchers from the field of psychology have used movies to find out something for psychological research. This shows that films can be useful material or objects for knowledge about psychology.

The explanations above confirm that film is viewed as research material when it is placed in the academic field. Therefore, Buckland (1998) has also emphasized that since film plays a vital role in society, it needs to be examined and studied more deeply. Thus, films can be a research object with several uses, for example, developing knowledge.

techniques, treatment, as well as conveying messages and values (Isboli, 2017). The question that often arises in the minds of college students and novice researchers is how movies can be identified or interpreted from a semiotic point of view. Similar to plays, films present a story about a certain character, and it can also be interpreted as a visualized acting that will reflect or convey messages (Asri, 2020).

The images shown by movies contain representative meanings that cannot be seen as they are in movies, and that is why analyzing films means interpreting hidden meanings by using an approach that will reflect the relationship between the audience and the film's (Isboli et al., 2017). According to Bonilla (2014), films can be seen as an entry point into various semiotic levels and are effective in terms of expressing meaning, what is portrayed in movies can be studied by figuring out the meaning and concept (Rudy et al., 2022). Based on the study conducted by Mudjiono (2011), semiotics function to create meaning, and if it is related to films, it will show that something that is interpreted does not only contain information but there are also patterns formed by studying the signs reflected in the film. A sign obtained from a film does not necessarily show the meaning as it is because it can show something other than that meaning (Vrasandyka & Azeharie, 2021). The explanation above shows that to analyze or interpret films, semiotic theory can be considered the right choice. To understand how films can signify something, it is necessary to know the basis of semiotics and the semiotic theory suggested by one of the world famous semiotic figures from France, Roland Barthes.

Signs and Meaning in Barthes' Perspective

The most significant foundation in understanding the concept of semiotics is to know what it is about signs and needs to be observed or analyzed carefully, so that it can convey the meaning behind an object. The semiotic tradition consists of a set of theories about how signs represent objects, ideas, circumstances, situations, feelings, and conditions outside the signs (Mudjiyanto & Nur, 2013). Even though there have been several famous semiotics experts in the world, such as Ferdinand de Saussure, Roman Jakobson, and Roland Barthes, who put forward their own semiotic theories, this study still focuses on the semiotic theory explained by the French literary critic Roland Barthes.

In Barthes' thought, signs clearly observed by human senses convey ideologies or connotative meanings. His theory, inspired by Saussure's teaching, is considered to contribute to the science of signs and can be useful for studying media, films, culture, and literature. Barthes argued that in order to figure out the meaning of a sign, one needs to observe it by understanding two techniques - the 'signifier and signified' and myth and connotation. Both theories show how signs that appear neutral may define many things.

(a) Signifier and Signified

By gaining knowledge and inspiration from the leading semiotics expert Ferdinand de Saussure, Roland Barthes also emphasized the role of signifier and signified in his theory. In relation to signs, Griffin (2012) explains that an object (in the physical form) observed by people's sense is called signifier from Barthes' perspective. The signifier is part of the whole sign. The following table shows the role of signifier and signified in Barthes' semiotic theory.

Table 1. The example of interpreting objects using Barthes' semiotic theory

Signifier	Signified
Image (object) of a man in a black suit standing side by side with a woman in a white dress holding a bouquet of flower facing a man in priest's robe	Wedding ceremony / marriage
Sign	
The marriage	

"Signified" is the meaning inherent in the sign and both "signifier" and "signified" are strongly related to construct a combined sign (Griffin, 2012). In Barthes' semiotic theory, a signified can have some signifiers and this means, one may look for several images (objects) to signify something. In other words, there are a number of forms that one can

use to refer to a concept (Barthes, 1957/1991). In a semiotic perspective, a film is seen as a collection of signs. Therefore, in film studies, every scene, dialogue, character, setting, etc. can be interpreted by using Barthes' semiotic theory. The table above can be perceived as the first level of semiotic system. The sign in the table above contains more meaning if it is passed on to the second level semiotic system which will produce another sign called myth.

(b) Myth and Connotation

Barthes' semiotic theory is an explanation of myth which can also refer to the theory of connotation. However, the term 'myth' introduced by Roland Barthes is the myth related to superstitions, legends, magic, unreasonable events, or irrationality. This means when the object is interpreted by using the myth theory mentioned by Barthes, it can no longer be defined in the same way that a term is interpreted in its general sense. It will shift into a myth that occupies a level of meaning that is clearly different from the meaning of the word in general. In semiotics, myths play the role of providing explanation containing historical realities (Barthes, 1957/1991).

In this part, understanding denotation and connotation is essential. Denotation refers to the meaning of a word, object, or event that is generally in accordance with eye observation or that is usually stated in a dictionary (Wulansari et al., 2020). In other words, denotation is understood as the meaning of an object or a word based only on observations of human's five senses (the meaning that appears on the surface). Barthes calls it the first level semiological system (denotative system).

Whereas, connotation, according to Wulansari et al. (2020), refers to the varied and subjective meaning of an object or event and is usually related to how the meaning is constructed or described by someone. This is commonly known as the implicit (hidden) meaning. This is called the second level of the semiological system (connotative system). Thus, connotative signs can only be understood by those who have studied semiotics because signs in the scope of myth do not require explanation and do not need to be commented on, for this is the capacity of a semiotic expert to reveal or rearrange the meanings in the world of myth (Griffin, 2012).

Table 2. Barthes' Semiotic System

signifier (1)	signified (2)
SIGNIFIER (1)	SIGNIFIED (II)
SIGN (MYTH) (III)	

Source: Roland Barthes (1957/1991). *Mythologies*. (A. Lavers, trans.). New York: The Noonday Press.

The table above shows that the signified, signified, and sign at the first level of the semiotic system are marked with numbers using numbers (1), (2), and (3). This step carries denotative meaning (the first level of the semiotic system). Looking at the example in Table 1, the sign in the first-level semiotic system will become a signifier in the second-level semiotic system. The meaning at the second level has shifted from denotative meaning to connotative meaning. The connotative meaning can be interpreted by relating it to a concept that is closely related to the signifier and signified based on the perceptions, experience, and considerations of the person interpreting it. It will produce a sign with ideological and cultural meaning, which Barthes calls a myth. So, "marriage" is a signifier. It can show the meaning "union of love, commitment to fidelity, or purity of love" as the signified. Both signifier and signified produce a concept of "the ultimate proof of true love in human culture" as the myth.

According to Barthes (1957/1991) in myth, an object is defined by how it conveys a meaning and every object can be a myth because it can be open, observed and responded by people since there are no rules to limit it. In other words,

any object or event can be interpreted, communicated, and used as speech to express certain meaning. More specifically, Barthes argued that within this myth theory, when one interprets an object, he will express it with meta-language to connect it to a term or overall sign that is appropriate for the myth (Barthes, 1957/1991). It provides an understanding that the mythology behind a number of signs found in a community shows the actual natural conditions that exist in the present, which appear problematic and disorderly (Griffin, 2012).

The idea above shows that interpreting a sign, which occupies the level of myth in Barthes' semiotics, involves several factors, such as knowledge, background, and experience, that construct one's perception. Regarding this, Tomaselli (1981) has long argued that the basis of interpretation comes from perception.

CONCLUSION

Apart from being entertainment media, film is one of the objects that can be research material and to be studied because it contains various kinds of meanings, concepts, ideas, etc. One of the approaches to studying films is through semiotic theory. Starting from Ferdinand de Saussure's thoughts about 'signifiers' and 'signifieds' in linguistics, semiotics was later developed into a significant theory for analysis as well as interpretation in the fields of humanities and communications. Barthes's Semiotics is one of the theories used in cultural studies. Based on his opinion, all objects that are clearly observed by the human senses are categorized as 'signifiers,' which can be defined denotatively to become 'signifieds' to form a sign with meaning in accordance with the rules of language in general. If this order of signifier and signified is brought to the next level of the semiotic system, the sign with denotative meaning will take the position of a signifier, which will be interpreted connotatively to form an ideological concept known as a myth in Barthes' semiotics. Thus, for students or researchers who study films, Barthes' semiotic theory can help explore the meaning behind dialogs, scenes, plots, characters, and other objects found in films.

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