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A SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS ON SYMBOL IN SELECTED HOLLYWOOD HORROR MOVIE POSTERS

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ABSTRACT

Semiotics is the academic field dedicated to the study of symbols and signs. It is a study of how meaning is created by symbols and signs. As a semiotics study this research analyzes symbols and meanings found on horror movie posters. The research method applied in this study is qualitative descriptive approach to identify, analyze, and explain the symbols and meaning found on the Hollywood Horror Movie Poster. It uses a semiotic theory of Barthes (1983). The data in the discovery and analysis section of this research were taken from 5 Hollywood poster horror films. As the analysis of this research, it was found several symbols of each movie poster consisting of symbols in writing and visual images that are viewed from denotation, connotation and myth in each symbol.

Keyword: *Semiotics, Symbols, Meaning, and Movie Poster.*

INTRODUCTION

Semiotic is a study of sign which assumes social phenomena or daily activity of the society and culture. As sub-field of linguistic besides Phonology, Morphology and syntax, semiotics is a study concerned to sign or sign process, analogy, symbolism, signification and communication. In addition Chandler (2007) says, signs or symbols is not only focus on image, it could be gestures, colors, clothes, vehicles, and also words. It means that signs and symbols can be found in any aspect of human life and their environment.

Movie poster is one of the products which need a picture to advertise itself to the viewer. Poster can be found in many advertisements. It is a simple way to communicate or promote a product. As a film, there are some design elements such as images illustration, signs, symbols, colors, typography and so on that carrying a messages also information from that film. In analyzing an image, it is not just about what exists on the image, but what the meaning of the image is. It relates to semiotic concept that uses image as analyzing data. In this case, several Hollywood film posters with the same genre horror are chosen to be analyzed using Barthes' theory. Each poster has its symbol in form of sign as visually or textually which have denotation and connotation.

According to Saussure (1983), the relationship between the signifier and the marker is arbitrary, either by chance or established. Barthes is expanded the theory of signs that proposed by Saussure who says language is the system of sign. Which every sign is formed of two parts. They are signifier as the sound image and the signified as the concept. Under lied from that, Barthes (1983) composed the signification includes denotation (as the real meaning) and connotation (as the meaning derives from the personal and cultural experiences).

The term denotation refers to the literal meaning of a sign; to what is 'objectively' present and easily recognize or identified (Dryer, 2008). It describes the literal or obvious meaning of the sign, thus, denotation of the visual image refers to what all people see without association to their culture, ideology or society. Barthes (1983) expressed that the denoted message bears analogical properties and it is primary to connotation in the process of signification. In this level of signification, we deal with the sign as the basic meaning that is independent of the context and subjective interpretations as in connotation, for example, the image of sunrise denoted as the beginning of the day, and the end of night, while in connotation the sunrise can be described if a new day full hope, the end of the darkness, may be light and many other interpretation.

Connotation describes the interaction that occurs when the sign meets the feelings or emotion of their users and the values of their culture (Fisk, 1992). Connotation is being itself as a system that comprises signifier, signified and as the process which unites the former to the latter (Barthes, 1983). Connotation is placed on the second level of semiotics system. The connotation meaning can be influenced by the factors of cultural and myths. In the semiotic analysis, Barthes uses Myth which concerns on the cultural values, beliefs and ideological critics. The myth can be found in some products of mass culture like the advertisement, photograph, television and many more., so the analysis of myth must be correlated with the connotation as the meaning former on the second level of semiotics system.

Myths are commonly regarded as classical always associated with gods or heroes, and popular use of the term myth refers to beliefs that arises in the midst of society and becomes something that is difficult to believe in its true nature. Yet, the use of myths in semiotic is different from what we usually know.

The myth of Barthes' understanding is the coding of meaning and social values (which are actually arbiter or connotative) as something that is considered scientific. The myth for Barthes is the culture's way of thinking and conceptualizing it, and the existing myth has a common use and understanding in culture before the photograph which stimulates a series of concepts.

People use symbols to express their feelings and thoughts about phenomena, life, and death. According to Shaw (1881) as cited in Fadaee (2010) says Symbol is something used for, or regarded as, representing something else. More specifically, a symbol is a word, phrase, or other expression having a complex of associated meanings; in this sense, a symbol is viewed as having values different from those of whatever is being symbolized. A sign can be anything that points to something else. For example, object, words, actions, and even persons, it can be artificial or natural. In other hand, symbols are special signs that go beyond just pointing to something. Symbols are signs with deep meanings that are held consciously and subconsciously. Here is an example of symbols, the rose as a symbol of youth and beauty. A flag is a piece of cloth which stands for or is a symbol of a nation.

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

There are five posters analyzed. It is found several signs that have denotative and connotative meanings, also the myth that shows in textual and visual symbols. This analysis is described by using semiotic signification concept from Barthes's theory (1983).

Sinister Poster

1. Paranormal Activity and Insidious

Denotation: *From the producer of Paranormal Activity and Insidious* is the symbol that is formed textual on poster, the producer here refers to one name, Jason Blum, he is an American national producer with a wealth of experience in the film and television industry as a producer.

Connotation: Implicitly the designer wants to tell his message to the reader this is a film with a high level of horror, "if you watch this movie, you will feel the sensation of horror as you have experienced when watching paranormal activity and insidious films". That is a message the designers want to reveal to readers.

Myth: As a producer who produces horror films during his career, Blum wants to emphasize to the reader that he is one of the film producers who has experience and consistently produces the best quality horror films. Showing famous and best-selling movie titles on the market is a powerful weapon to get the first attention from readers.

2. Once you see it, nothing can save you

Denotation: Once you see it, nothing can save you is a tagline that designer uses to invite readers attention.

Connotation: This tagline gives a clue to the reader that a creature is very powerful as if no one can stop him. This sentence carries the meaning of death for anyone who meets the creature. In other hand, through this tagline designer tries to show a bad threat and give an warning to the people.

Myth: The tagline here has a function to build the myth of horror, fear, threat, and death that will be felt by all viewers when watching this film. The myth that is trying to be built through this tagline will have an effect on the first impression of the audience when looking at the poster only.

3. A standing girl in white who walks to the left

Denotation: A standing girl in white who walks to the left, is the main object from the poster of the film that is a sign which is in the form of a visual symbol. A presence of girl in white clothes shows an innocent and fragile personal.

Connotation: In this case, the use of little girl on this poster is a stereo typical female victims often used in horror film for being the 'weaker gender' making her seem more vulnerable so she is always be a victims of supernatural disorders.

Furthermore, white in the positive connotation is always associated with purity and freedom from malice or evil intentions.

Myth: A little girl presence in this horror film poster is important because she is the main sign in this poster. Her hiding face as if says she is a victim or an object of a demonic evil that is under-control and need a help. In traditional gender stereotypes woman is associated with her nature such as kind, sensitive, emotional, cries a lot, easy influence and submissive.

4. A creepy face in blood

Denotation: A creepy face in blood The main focal point in terms of images on the poster is the demon face in blood. The image highlights the eyes of the demon which

links with the tag line 'once he sees you, you can't be saved' which creates a fearful atmosphere. The eyes look like they are making eye contact with the audience making the tagline more personal to them and also creating a creepy feeling.

Connotation: The image is also made from blood which is a typical of the horror genre that cruel and full of terror. The demon's eyes staring at the audience have connotations as warnings, threats, and supervision of its victims in the film. The sign in the form of a visual symbol seems to convey the audience that they will find fear and cruelty when watching this film. It is supported by the tagline which increases killer impression.

Myth: This sign in the form of a visual symbol builds a myth about an evil creature found on a film poster that will spread terror and watch to every victim along the film.

Lemony Snicket's A Series of Unfortunate Events Poster

1. Jim Carrey

Denotation: *Jim Carrey*, Jim Carrey is the name of male artist from Canada. He is an actor, producer and musician. His name is Count Olaf in this movie. He takes the most important role in this movie. His bad, evil character improved the story plot in this movie. His appearing had shaped the plot of the unfortunate events of the Baudelaire's children.

Connotation: By using his name, it will make the viewers want to watch the movie because the actor is Jim Carrey, the name of famous and talented actor. Jim Carrey here is as the tool for marketing to attract the viewers because of his talent in acting. His name here has the emphasis, it shows that there is important information in it which influences much the theme of poster.

Myth: This textual symbol shows the myth about Jim Carrey as the main actor. Through this symbol, graphic designer wants to built a good image of this film by Jim Carrey' name because he is one of famous actors in Hollywood. In this case, the show of his name to convey the audience that this film is worth to watch because it plays by Jim Carrey.

2. Lemony Snicket's A series of Unfortunate Events

Denotation: Lemony Snicket's A series of Unfortunate Events, This is the title of the movie. By seeing the title people will know that this movie tells about some

unfortunate events experienced by people. The words of Lemony Snicket's on the poster show that this movie story is brought by Lemony Snicket.

Connotation: In the beginning of the movie, it is opened by the story which is told by Lemony Snicket. He is the one who writes about the Baudelaire's family, it is from the beginning to the ending of the story. This is why in this poster Lemony Snicket is also showed. Actually, the real name of Lemony Snicket is Daniel Handler. There are two writers of A Series of Unfortunate Events, They are Daniel Handler (Lemony Snicket) and Robert Gordon.

Myth: The myth that wanted to be built on this sign was the quality of a good story made by Lemony Snicket in his novel would be the main weapon in attracting the attention of the audiences. This textual symbol brings the message of a good novel story has been visualized in the form of a film that is just as good.

3. Full moon

Denotation: Full moon, A visual symbol that consist to The background of the poster is the moon with bright color. Its position in centre fulfill almost the poster's background.

Connotation: The moon that only appears at night is always associated with something related to darkness, mystery, ritual and the presence of creepy creatures. Here the moon is connoted as an evil force that always overshadows Baudelaire's kids.

Myth: Some people said that full moon describes the mad behavior like attacks of violence, murder, and the other illegal activities. In the westerns culture, Full moon is also described as the time when werewolf appears to show his true self. Werewolf refers to someone who is cursed to be a wolf. It will become a wolf when the full moon lights up. Those myths are appropriate with this movie poster. In this poster, the shadow of Count Olaf seems like werewolf who has long nails and his hands are ready to catch his prey.

The Final Destination Poster

1. The Final Destination

Denotation: The Final Destination, this is the title of the film written with white capital fonts with flash-like effects that make this title more prominent.

Connotation: The typeface of the title in this poster is white which is effective as it stands out against the black background and is a common color used in horror genre

because it can be related to ghosts and creepy beings. It is also in capitals which makes it look quite masculine as it is bold and it has sharp, strong edges. This is very effective because it gives the typeface a strong look. It also has a flash effect over the top of it which connotes ghosts and death.

Myth: According to the connotation meaning in the textual symbol in the form of the sign of title, graphic designers want to turn on the myth about something terrible, cruel, scary that is attached to the title of this film as an illustration of the character's fate who died in tragically.

2. Screaming an Half Skull-Face,

Denotation: Screaming an half skull-face, This film poster has many conventions of a horror film poster, for example visual communications are used effectively through the facial expressions as the audience can clearly see that the skull part of the face is screaming, this shows that it is scared or shocked of something which creates enigma.

Connotation: The fact that there is a skull image as half of the face gives the connotation of death and that the person is about to die or has already died. This is a common convention of horror films and is very effective because the audience will relate the poster with the horror genre automatically and horror fans would immediately want to watch the film.

Myth: The myth that is wanted to be built through this sign is a terrible atmosphere will be the main portion that will be displayed throughout this film.

3. Shattered glass

Denotation: Shattered glass, The visual communications works well with the horror theme because there are many conventions used such as the broken mirror or glass.

Connotation: The meaning of this image is that you cannot escape because it is like someone is trying to escape from something but they cannot get away, therefore they are breaking through the mirror or glass.

Myth: The use of the mirror or glass as a prop is very clever because broken mirrors are supposedly bad luck, this myth is always delivered in horror film to give a sign about something bad will happen. Therefore this gives the audience the suggesting that the person is having lots of bad things happen to the character.

4. Rest in Pieces

Denotation: Rest in Pieces, There is a tag line at the top of the poster which says 'Rest

In 'Pieces', this humorous play on words is very enticing to the target audience as they will know that death is involved in this film and therefore horror fans will be interested by this particular use of language. The typeface used for this tag line is white which makes it stand out against the black background and it is also degraded which is typical of horror typefaces.

Connotation: The word 'pieces' here supports the visual symbol in the form of broken glass that can be interpreted as the condition of the mutilated victims or even destroyed as what happened to the glass.

Myth: Same as previous films, the final destination always presents sadistic violence and death for its victims. This tagline was made so that the lovers were curious and interested in watching. The word 'pieces' is a magic word on this poster tagline, as if giving the clue that the final destination always presents sadism, brutality, tragic presented to its fans.

5. Dark Background

Denotation: Dark Background, The lighting is very dark, this makes the poster enigmatic thus it makes it clear to the audience that this is a poster for a creepy film. The colour scheme used is also a common convention of the horror genre. Connotation: The psychology and meaning of the colour in the image is very clever as it has a tint of blue over the image which is highly associated with horror..

Myt: The myth built on this sign is a picture of fear, anxiety, confusion and without the help felt by the women on this movie poster that shows through a dark and foggy background.

IT Movie Poster

1. You'll float too

Denotation: There are several textual symbols found on IT movie posters, such as taglines, movie titles and movie release dates. In this section, the denotation meaning contained in the 'You'll float too' tagline is written in white which makes it contrast with the dark background and the red film title.

Connotation: keyword from the tagline on the IT movie post. Float is connoted as a person who is powerless to control himself so that there are other forces that control it. In this case, the tagline 'you'll float too' describes the situation of the victims who were influenced by the clown monster who ended up dead for them.

Myth: The myth which is created in this tagline is the existence of clown monsters that make the victims scared and helpless when they are visited by him due to the magic power that makes the victims just follow the invitation.

2. **IT**

Denotation: *IT*, This is the title of the movie that is written in red also the biggest textual symbol which stand on the poster film, it just below the tagline in position. By seeing the title people will be confused by the text that what *IT* stand for and what *IT* refers to.

Connotation: As the color of blood or fire, red is often connoted as a color that indicates the existence of danger or used as a symbol of prohibition or warning. Font types that look like blood spots can be interpreted as energy that is strong, dangerous, cruel, and violent that can also be a representation of monster characters as a terror for victims. Large font sizes indicate a dominance of negative strength which is indicated by the type and color of the font.

Myth: Based on the connotation meaning in the textual symbol in the form of the sign of *IT*, graphic designers want to turn on the myth about something terrible, cruel, scary that is intentionally affixed to the title of this film as an illustration of the character's fate and the whole storytelling in the film.

3. **Aboy in yellow raincoat**

Denotation: Aboy in yellow raincoat, this is the next sign of the *IT* poster in the form of a visual symbol. The use of a child on this poster is because clowns and balloons are things that are liked by many children.

Connotation: By seeing the poster the child's posture that is shorter than the clown. In this case, the sign can be connoted as a situation where the child becomes a victim who is in fear, despair, no help wrapped in an intelligent frame without suspicion. Furthermore, the use of yellow on the jacket worn by the child is a sign that can be connoted as a coward or someone who is weak.

Myth: Yellow has cowardly and weak connotation, it refers to someone who has liver disease. As we know, people with the disease have yellow marks on their body parts and eyes. A boy in yellow raincoat is illustrated as the victims who is weak and being under controlled by the clown.

4. Red balloon

Denotation: Red balloon, the next sign in the form of a visual symbol is a red balloon held by a clown to give to the child. The use of balloons on this poster relates to the main villain character, a monster that resembles a clown. Clowns and balloons are a favorite of children who are almost always at every party or celebration.

Connotation: The balloon held by the clown on this poster has the connotation of happiness, joy, excitement and the things that attract children. In fact the balloon is a tool used by the clown as an attempt to get its victims, in this case the victims were children. Red color is the next sign found in this balloon, red can be connoted as passion, negative energy, enthusiasm, and danger which is an evil illustration of a clown character.

Myth: Balloon that is often used as party decorations or celebrations have a meaning of happiness, but in this poster the balloon changes its meaning because it is carried by a clown who has evil intentions on children. The myth that is wanted to be built through this sign is a balloon that is believed to be a symbol of celebration and pleasure is used as an incitement to get victims who are children.

5. Dark Background

Denotation: Dark Background, this is a sign that is in the form of a visual symbol found on an IT movie poster. In this poster there was a clown coming out of a place so dark that most of his body was not visible. In the background of the poster the impression of mysticism and horror was very pronounced on the poster of this film.

Connotation: Dark colors are a favorite color that is always included in horror posters because the mystical, horror, scary, and gripping impression has been naturalized along with this color. Dark colors on the background of the poster can be connoted as a place where clown monsters originate and the place where the monsters bring their victims who are children.

Myth: A sign that is a dark background that dominates all the colors on this movie poster is a representation of an atmosphere carried by an evil creature in the form of a clown. In this case, the myth that wanted to be built on a sign in the form of a visual symbol was that the evil creature was not a real clown, but a demonic figure that resembled a clown because he came from a dark place full of horror.

The Woman in Black Movie Poster

1. Daniel Radcliffe

Denotation: Daniel Radcliffe, is an English actor and producer. He has played some famous movies such as Harry Potter, Jungle, Horns, and so on. He discovered the past secrets of the villagers, his sense of anxiety deepened when he got to know a mysterious woman who was dressed in black.

Connotation: By using his name, it will attract the viewers to watch the movie because the actor is Daniel Radcliffe, the name of famous and talented actor. Daniel Radcliffe here as the tool for marketing to attract the viewers because of his talent in acting. His name here has the emphasis, it shows that there is important information in it which influences much the theme of poster

Myth: This textual symbol shows the myth about Daniel Radcliffe as the main actor. Through this symbol, graphic designer wants to built a good image of this film by Daniel Radcliffe's name because he is one of famous actor in Hollywood film industry.

2. The Woman in Black

Denotation: The woman who has a higher posture stands right in front of the children who are lined up in white clothes. In the layout on the poster of the film, the woman's figure was placed in the middle of a poster that turned her back on the audience so that the audience could not see the face of the woman.

Connotation: The figure of a woman in black is connoted as a woman who comes from darkness who is always surrounded by witches or mysterious, gripping figures, who has dark or deadly goals.

Myth: The woman in black is a sign that is in the form of a visual symbol, in this sign there is a myth that designers want to build that the woman on this poster is an evil creature that comes with the purpose of deadly and bring an atmosphere of depression in every presence and is believed to control its victims.

3. Children in White Standing before the Woman

Denotation: Children in white who are standing before the woman, this is the next sign that the writer found as a sign in the form of a visual symbol. In this picture some children wearing white clothes are standing in front of a woman wearing black clothes

that seem to dominate children in front of them.

Connotation: In horror films, Children are used as the main characters who are always haunted or become victims. In this case, the use of children on this poster is an easy target to be a victims often used in horror film for being the weaker character making them seem more vulnerable because of supernatural disorders.

Myth: A children presence in this horror film poster is important because they are one of the main sign in this poster beside the woman in black. They empty stare as if says they are victims or objects of an evil woman. Those children are under-control and need a help. The natural character of children is associated with as kind, sensitive, emotional, cries a lot, easy influence and submissive.

4. She'll never let go

Denotation: She'll never let go, In promoting a film, the use of a poster is one of the mainstay ways and promotional media to introduce a film to the audience. She'll never let go is a tagline that designer uses to invite readers attention.

Connotation: This tagline gives a clue to the reader that a woman is very powerful as if no one can stop her. This sentence carries the meaning of death and an evil terror for children who meets the woman in black. In other hand, through this tagline designer tries to illustrate how strong the woman to control children with a magic way which ends in death.

Myth: The myth that is trying to be built through this tagline will have an effect on the first impression of the audience when looking at the poster only. Besides, the existence of female ghosts is a manifestation of the subconscious of the fear of modern society against the power of women.

CONCLUSION

The conclusion refers to the functions of several poster elements such as film titles, taglines, characters, background, and image layout that can build perceptions and convince the audience only through movie posters. The semiotic signification concept of Roland Barthes (1983) was used to analyze the symbols contained in the five Hollywood horror posters.

Each symbol produces different meanings such as denotations, connotations of meanings and myths to be conveyed in the symbol. After, each symbol is analyzed and explained using the semiotic signification theory of Roland Barthes, it can be concluded that each symbol has different meanings in denotation, connotation and myths with the same goal which is attracting the attention of the audience through the signs shown in the horror poster.

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