International Journal of Education, Vocational and Social Science
https://e-journal.citakonsulindo.or.id/index.php/IJEVSS
E-ISSN : 2963 4954
IJEVSS

Representation Of Meaning And Ideology In Various Cultural Phenomena: A Literature Review Of Roland Barthes' Semiotics

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Abstract

This study examines the application of Roland Barthes's semiotic theory in analyzing various cultural and media phenomena in Indonesia, including modern architecture, local traditions, religious rituals, historical narratives, and film representations. Barthes's semiotics, particularly the concepts of denotation, connotation, and myth, provides a relevant analytical framework for understanding how signs are produced, interpreted, and naturalized within contemporary society. Myth, as Barthes argues, is not limited to traditional stories but operates through visual objects, cultural texts, and media representations that appear natural and objective. Employing a qualitative literature-based approach, this study analyzes five primary research articles alongside key theoretical references such as Barthes, Chandler, Fiske, Danesi, and Geertz. Qualitative content analysis was used to identify patterns of meaning and ideological constructions within each phenomenon discussed. The findings reveal a consistent pattern across the studies: any cultural object, whether architecture, ritual, or film, functions as a sign carrying social and ideological meaning. Processes of connotation and myth-making are evident in the controversies surrounding Masjid Al-Safar, the cultural symbolism of the Guro-Guro Aron tradition, the religious meanings embedded in the Balinese Otonan ritual, the historical mythologization of the Makassar War, and the representation of violence and masculinity in The Raid 2. Integrating additional literature further demonstrates that culture operates as an interconnected web of signs, affirming the continuing relevance of Barthes's semiotics in interpreting ideology within contemporary visual culture and digital media. This study highlights the importance of semiotics as a tool for uncovering the layered meanings and power structures embedded in modern cultural and media practices.

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Keywords: Roland Barthes semiotics; connotation; myth; culture; media; representation.

INTRODUCTION

Studies on signs and the process of meaning-making in social life have developed significantly within the fields of communication, culture, and media studies. Semiotics has become one of the most widely used analytical approaches for understanding how meaning is produced, disseminated, and maintained in modern society. In the development of semiotic theory, Roland Barthes is one of the most influential figures because he proposed two orders of signification: denotation, which refers to literal meaning, and connotation, which refers to ideological meaning. He also introduced the concept of myth as a second-order signification system that naturalizes ideology (Barthes, 1972).

Barthes viewed myth as "a type of speech" that works to conceal social constructions behind appearances that seem natural (Barthes, 1972). Thus, myth is not only found in traditional stories, but also exists in visual objects, rituals, architectural styles, digital media, and everyday cultural practices (Fiske, 2011). Barthes' thought provides a strong foundation for researchers to interpret hidden representations behind seemingly simple social phenomena, including cultural symbols, religious rituals, films, and modern architecture.

In contemporary studies, Barthes' semiotics remains relevant because today's society lives in an environment filled with signs, ranging from digital symbols and visual media to the narrative structures of social media. Chandler (2017) emphasizes that semiotics serves as a tool for understanding how signs work to shape social reality and how ideology permeates visual, verbal, and audiovisual discourse. In addition, Danesi (2010) explains that modern culture is a "web of signs" that operates interconnectedly in influencing the way humans understand the world.

In the Indonesian context, semiotic studies have also developed widely in the fields of Nusantara culture, architecture, media communication, local traditions, and visual representation. This is evident in several studies analyzed in this literature review. First, the architectural controversy surrounding the Al-Safar Mosque demonstrates how the geometric form of a building can be read ideologically by society through the process of mythologization (Hatta, 2019). Second, the Guro-Guro Aron tradition analyzed by Br Pelawi et al. (2025) shows that Karo cultural symbols function to strengthen collective identity and customary relations. Third, Palogai (2021) highlights the Makassar War as a space for the production of historical myths, in which the defeat of Gowa is reinterpreted as a discourse of identity and colonialism.

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Fourth, research on the Balinese Otonan ritual shows how elements of religious rituals contain rich symbolic meanings and operate as religious myths (Kusuma & Nurhayati, 2017). Fifth, in the context of modern media, Nasirin & Pithaloka (2022) reveal that the film *The Raid 2* presents signs of violence that function not merely as entertainment but also as representations of the ideology of masculinity and domination.

The integration of these five studies shows that Barthes' semiotics has methodological flexibility in examining various cultural objects, ranging from modern architecture and local traditions to historical narratives and the visualization of violence in film. In line with Geertz (1973), culture can be read as a "text" that must be interpreted through symbols; therefore, semiotic analysis helps reveal hidden layers of meaning.

The relevance of Barthes' theory has become even stronger in the digital era, when the production of signs occurs massively through social media, digital advertising, films, and other visual products. Digital culture provides a new space for the formation of contemporary myths in the form of idealized bodies, religion, modernity, nationalism, and ethnic identity (Ibrahim, 2018). Thus, semiotic studies do not merely deconstruct signs but also open an understanding of the power and ideology that operate through representation.

Based on the importance of such meaning-making, this study presents a literature review on the application of Roland Barthes' semiotic theory, covering architecture, culture, ritual, history, and film. Its purpose is to provide a comprehensive overview of how Barthes' theory is used to read signs and myths in various contexts of social life. By adding relevant open-access literature, this study aims to strengthen conceptual and methodological understanding of Barthes' semiotics in contemporary cultural and media studies.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach based on literature study, a method that emphasizes in-depth analysis of various relevant written sources to understand a phenomenon conceptually. This approach was chosen because research on Roland Barthes' semiotics is theoretical and interpretive in nature, so it does not require field data collection. Instead, it requires precision in reading, interpreting, and connecting the findings of previous studies. According to Creswell (2014), qualitative research allows researchers to explore meanings that emerge from texts, symbols, and discourses, making it suitable for theoretical and cultural studies.

The research data sources are drawn from journal articles, academic books, and open-access scientific publications that directly discuss the application of Barthes' semiotics in various

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social, cultural, architectural, religious ritual, historical, and media contexts. The selected literature includes five main journals analyzed in depth, along with supporting theoretical references such as the works of Barthes (1972), Chandler (2017), Fiske (2011), and Danesi (2010). The literature was selected based on its relevance and contribution to the understanding of signs, connotation, and myth, as recommended by Merriam & Tisdell (2016) in text-based qualitative research.

Data analysis was conducted using qualitative content analysis, which aims to identify key concepts, patterns of meaning, and sign constructions discussed in various sources. Krippendorff (2019) explains that qualitative content analysis enables researchers to interpret messages and symbols in texts systematically while remaining flexible toward social and cultural contexts. In this study, the analysis was carried out by carefully reading each piece of literature, identifying sections relevant to Barthes' theory, and organizing the findings into interrelated categories.

Furthermore, the interpretation process was conducted using a comparative approach, namely by comparing the findings from each piece of literature to identify similarities in meaning patterns, differences in analysis, and the development of Barthes' semiotics across various disciplines. This comparative approach is important for producing a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of how signs and myths operate in various cultural representations. In line with Bowen's (2009) view, qualitative literature study allows researchers to draw conceptual conclusions based on the interpretation of the documents analyzed.

Therefore, the qualitative literature study method is used because it is the most appropriate approach for the purpose of this research, namely to develop a comprehensive understanding of the application of Roland Barthes' semiotics in various cultural and media phenomena, as well as to demonstrate how the theory is used in contemporary research in Indonesia.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

Semiotic studies are based on the understanding that all aspects of human life are constructed through systems of signs. Signs are not limited to spoken language, but also include images, symbols, rituals, architecture, and even everyday actions that produce meaning within society. In the tradition of modern semiotics, Ferdinand de Saussure's thought serves as a major foundation through the concepts of the signifier and the signified, in which meaning is understood as the result of the relationship between form and concept that is socially constructed. Saussure emphasized that meaning is not inherent in an object, but is created through a system of

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differences and relations within the broader structure of language (Saussure, 1983).

Saussure's thought was later expanded by Roland Barthes, who developed semiotics into the realm of popular culture. Barthes argued that signs operate on two orders of meaning, namely denotation and connotation. Denotation refers to the literal meaning as perceived by the senses, while connotation refers to meanings associated with cultural values, ideology, and the collective experiences of society. At this second level, signs transform into myths, namely discourses that function to naturalize certain meanings so that they appear natural and unquestionable (Barthes, 1972). Through the concept of myth, Barthes demonstrated how social constructions can be disguised as truths that seem normal, thereby influencing the way society understands the world around it.

Barthes' thought is important in cultural and media studies because it enables researchers to read the hidden layers of meaning behind visual and narrative representations. Fiske (2011) describes semiotics as a tool for uncovering how meaning is produced in modern communication, especially when signs no longer stand alone but always carry ideological content. In the context of contemporary culture, signs develop in various forms such as fashion, architecture, religious rituals, films, and digital media. Danesi (2010) emphasizes that culture is essentially a network of interconnected signs, so meaning cannot be separated from the social context in which signs operate.

Semiotic studies in the Indonesian context are highly relevant, considering the diversity of cultural symbols that exist within society. The architecture of Al-Safar Mosque, for example, illustrates how geometric forms can be interpreted ideologically, giving rise to myths about the Illuminati (Hatta, 2019). Similarly, the Guro-Guro Aron tradition contains Karo customary symbols, in which cultural practices serve as a means of maintaining collective identity (Pelawi et al., 2025). In the historical realm, narratives about the Makassar War show how historical events can transform into social myths that shape collective memory (Palogai, 2021). Religious symbolism in the Balinese Otonan ritual also demonstrates how signs function to convey spiritual, moral, and religious values through inherited ritual practices (Kusuma & Nurhayati, 2017). Even in film, such as *The Raid 2*, violence is not merely presented visually, but becomes an ideological sign concerning power and masculinity (Nasirin & Pithaloka, 2022).

The development of communication technology further strengthens the relevance of Barthes' semiotics. Digital media create an environment filled with visual and symbolic representations that operate rapidly and massively. According to Sobur (2013), semiotics remains important in the digital context because society no longer only consumes signs, but also produces

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and modifies them. Barthes' semiotics itself offers a strong theoretical framework for understanding how meaning and ideology operate in various cultural practices, both traditional and contemporary.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The literature review shows that Roland Barthes' semiotic theory is widely used to analyze various social, cultural, architectural, historical, ritual, and media phenomena. The synthesis of the five main journals that serve as the focus of this study indicates that Barthes' two-level model of meaning, namely denotation and connotation, as well as his concept of myth, provides an effective analytical framework for examining representations and hidden ideologies behind signs. Each study uses a different object, yet they reveal a relatively similar pattern of meaning, namely that signs are never neutral, but carry cultural meanings and social constructions that function to naturalize certain ideologies.

In the study of the architecture of Al-Safar Mosque, for example, it was found that the geometric form of the building, designed using a folding approach, was perceived by the public not only as an aesthetic expression but also as containing certain connotations that gave rise to a myth about Illuminati symbols. The study shows how public interpretation can fill visual signs with new ideological meanings that were not part of the creator's original intention (Hatta, 2019). Therefore, the literature findings show that the process of mythologization can occur through social interaction and discourse construction, not merely from the object itself.

The literature study on Karo culture through the Guro-Guro Aron tradition also shows that cultural symbols function as signs that construct collective identity. Dances, traditional clothing, and customary interaction structures contain connotations of communal values, social hierarchy, and togetherness. These connotations are then condensed into cultural myths that strengthen the legitimacy of Karo customs within modern society (Pelawi et al., 2025). The literature findings emphasize that culture is not only a symbolic expression but also a means of transmitting ideology that is maintained through tradition.

The literature findings related to historical narratives also show that past events can turn into myths through repeated interpretation. The study of the Makassar War reveals how the defeat of the Kingdom of Gowa is not only understood as a historical event but also transformed into a symbol of suffering, heroism, and power relations between colonizers and indigenous people (Palogai, 2021). This literature shows that history works as a sign that produces connotations of identity and solidarity in contemporary society.

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In the context of religious rituals, the literature review on the Balinese Otonan ritual shows that ritual elements such as offerings, prayers, clothing, and colors are signs rich in religious meaning. The denotation of these ritual objects then develops into spiritual connotations of purity, protection, and the relationship between humans and divine power. These connotations subsequently form myths about moral obligations and religious beliefs that are considered natural by Balinese Hindu society (Kusuma & Nurhayati, 2017). These findings show that ritual practices function as a sign system that connects traditional values with the religious identity of the community.

Meanwhile, the literature study on the film *The Raid 2* shows that violence is not only presented as visual action but also carries connotative meanings that reflect power, domination, and masculinity. The findings indicate that scenes such as physical fights, harsh verbal expressions, and symbols of blood are used as signs that produce the myth that violence is a legitimate and heroic way to resolve conflict in the action film genre (Nasirin & Pithaloka, 2022). This finding reinforces Barthes' view that popular media often reproduce and normalize ideology through visual representation.

Overall, the literature review reveals a consistent pattern: although the objects of study differ, all studies show that signs in cultural and media contexts always operate at two levels of meaning. Connotation emerges from values collectively constructed within society, while myth strengthens established ideologies. The synthesis also shows that Barthes' theory has high flexibility to be applied to various research objects, ranging from architecture to film, because its framework emphasizes the process through which meaning is constructed, negotiated, and naturalized in social life.

DISCUSSION

General Patterns of Meaning-Making in the Five Journals

The literature review results indicate a consistent pattern of meaning-making in the use of Roland Barthes' semiotics across the five analyzed journals. Although each study examines different objects, ranging from architecture, religious rituals, cultural traditions, historical narratives, to film, all of them demonstrate that any object can function as a sign. Barthes (1972) emphasizes that signs are not limited to language, but include all forms of representation that can be perceived and interpreted by humans. This finding is reflected in the way society interprets the architectural symbols of the Al-Safar Mosque, cultural gestures in Guro-Guro Aron, ritual objects in Balinese Otonan, historical symbols in the Makassar War, and scenes of violence in *The Raid 2*.

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The similarity in these patterns of meaning-making shows that signs always exist within a specific socio-cultural context. The meaning of a symbol is not determined by the object itself, but by how society reads it based on experiences, beliefs, and discourses that have developed within their social environment. The connotations that emerge from this interpretive process then develop into myths that naturalize certain ideologies. In various cases, myths function to present religious ideology, customary values, power, and identity politics as something natural and accepted without much questioning.

This general pattern aligns with Barthes' concept that meaning is layered: the first sign provides literal meaning, while the second sign provides cultural meaning that plays a role in maintaining social structures. Therefore, the five journals show that Barthes' semiotics is an effective and consistent analytical tool for reading the dynamics of cultural meaning-making across various domains.

The Relevance of Barthes' Semiotics in Contemporary Phenomena

Further studies show that the relevance of Barthes' theory is very evident in reading contemporary socio-cultural phenomena. In the case of Al-Safar Mosque, the misreading of architectural symbols led to the emergence of a myth about the Illuminati. Society associated the geometric forms of the building with certain connotations, which later developed into a new ideological narrative. This phenomenon illustrates how architectural signs can be used or received as ideological symbols through public discourse, regardless of the designer's original intention.

In Karo culture and Balinese Hindu rituals, myth operates differently. In both contexts, myth does not emerge through symbolic conflict but functions as a cultural device that maintains the continuity of collective values and community identity. Traditional symbols and ritual elements serve as signs that combine moral teachings, social structures, and spirituality, thereby forming meanings that are considered natural by their respective communities.

In the historical context, the Makassar War shows how historical events can undergo a process of mythologization. The defeat of the Kingdom of Gowa is not only understood as a historical fact but also as a construction of identity that continues to shape social and political relations today. Myth becomes a means of affirming collective memory, solidarity, and the identity of struggle.

Meanwhile, in the context of film, *The Raid 2* shows how violence is represented aesthetically and ideologically. Violence in the film is not merely an action visual, but functions as a sign that frames courage, extreme masculinity, and the legitimacy of domination. The myth

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formed in the film positions violence as a form of heroism that can be accepted within a cinematic narrative.

The analysis of these various contexts shows that Barthes' semiotic approach is not only relevant to classical texts or traditional culture but is also highly effective in understanding modern phenomena within architecture, media, and social discourse.

The discussion is further strengthened by additional theoretical literature. Chandler (2017) emphasizes that connotation is the result of social construction, not a natural meaning. This means that every interpretation depends on the cultural framework and collective experience of society. This explains why symbols in architecture, tradition, or film can carry different meanings in different communities.

Danesi (2010) views culture as a network of signs that influence one another. In the context of the five journal studies, this idea is clearly visible: every object, whether a mosque, dance, ritual, historical event, or film, does not stand alone but is part of a broader network of meaning within Indonesian culture.

Fiske (2011) and Geertz (1973) both emphasize that cultural texts must be read as layered systems of meaning. This perspective aligns with Barthes' approach, which views cultural representation as a space for negotiating meaning between the creator, the text, and the reader. At this point, signs function not only as a medium of information but also as ideological mechanisms that influence how society understands and evaluates reality.

In the context of modern visual culture, Piliang (2012) expands Barthes' concept by showing that new myths are formed through digital media, visual aesthetics, and contemporary communication practices. The integration of this perspective strengthens the finding that Barthes' semiotics remains relevant, and even increasingly important, in reading contemporary cultural developments that are highly visual and digitally connected.

Overall, the integration of theoretical literature and the findings of the five journal studies shows that Barthes' semiotics does not only function to interpret signs but also serves as a tool for understanding the dynamics of ideology and power operating through cultural representation. The relevance of this theory appears in every case studied, showing that the interpretation of signs is an ongoing social process that continues to shape the way society understands the world.

CONCLUSION

The literature review shows that Roland Barthes' semiotic theory has strong relevance in analyzing various cultural and media phenomena in Indonesia. The concepts of denotation,

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connotation, and myth have proven effective in explaining how signs work to construct meaning while also naturalizing ideology in social life. Various objects of study, including the architecture of Al-Safar Mosque, the Guro-Guro Aron tradition, the Balinese Otonan ritual, the historical narrative of the Makassar War, and the film *The Raid 2*, demonstrate that signs are never neutral, but are always connected to the social context, cultural values, and discursive constructions surrounding them.

This study shows that the process of meaning-making operates on two levels, with connotation developing into myth and influencing how society understands identity, power, spirituality, and history. The integration of additional literature strengthens the understanding that culture is a network of interconnected signs that continues to be produced through various forms of visual and narrative representation. Therefore, this study affirms that Barthes' semiotics remains an important and flexible approach for interpreting the dynamics of meaning and ideology in contemporary culture.

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