

Representation of Sovereign Power and Its Resistance in Wonka (2023): Barthes' Semiotics Analysis

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Abstract

This study explores the representation of power relations, particularly sovereign power and resistance, in the film "Wonka," directed by Paul King. Utilizing a descriptive-qualitative approach and applying Roland Barthes' semiotic theory of denotation and connotation, the research analyzes key scenes to reveal how power dynamics are depicted through violence, authority, and control. The narrative follows Willy Wonka's journey as he confronts the oppressive forces of a chocolate cartel, illustrating the complexities of power and the resilience of individuals who resist such dominance. The findings highlight the film's broader socio-political themes, emphasizing the transformative potential of resistance and the capacity of visual media to critique power structures. Ultimately, this study underscores the significance of film as a medium for social commentary and its role in envisioning alternative power dynamics, offering insights into the interplay of power, resistance, and storytelling in contemporary cinema.

Keywords: Connotation; Denotation; Movie; Semiotics; Wonka

INTRODUCTION

Power is definitely existed in our society. Power is influencing or controlling people, organizing or shaping societies, and the relationship of people (Zulkarnaen et al., n.d.). In case how is power exercised, power can limit someone to give its impact without ever directly connecting how the impact occurs with its cause or basic nature. It seems that a power becomes mysterious since its existence is invisible, it may lead people in doubt because they prefer not to question it. In this way, which is never officially justified explicitly, someone will suspect some oddities. However, is not people's disbelief able to show the assumption that every power is something that has its origins, basic nature, and manifestations.

Further, according to Foucault, power can be outlined in three types: sovereign power, disciplinary power, and biopower (Lilja & Vinthagen, 2014). The first type is Sovereign power, it is characterized with obedience, security and the embodiment of force or authority. (Foucault, 1975, as cited in Altunok, 2016). This form of power can involve dramatic displays of power as harsh punishment, and can even cause great pain. This is a type of power that is arrogant so that it does not want to accept differences of opinion from others, or is a show of loyalty to other strongest power centers. This is a form of power that, when people accept it, will allow the attachment of sovereignty by claiming a sense of monopoly of power. This kind of power is able to change a person's identity into a ruler who always wants to be followed by orders by those below. The second type is biopower, is technology that refers to a power, which is able to organize a human subject as a population of power (Fiaz et al., 2019). With various techniques that are usually applied, biopower has the function of inciting someone to strengthen power and easily control funds to monitor from various aspects to optimize and organize a power. The third type is disciplinary, this kind of power can act as something negative, disciplinary, and repressive through institutions. It tries to control or regulate people behavior, how to act, and how to do (Scher, 2020). However, power is not only repressive but also productive that can create and make things happen, build ideas about pleasure and pain, and achieve results.

Moreover, from every power that is formed, there will definitely be resistance from several parties. Who oppose disappointment and provide resistance to all arbitrary powers that oppress many people. This is where resistance begins. Foucault stated that, "Where there is

power, there is resistance.” (as cited in Smart, 2004). What Foucault meant was that every resistance will always be present where there is power running, that every power relationship is always followed by various forms of resistance. That there is always a mindset that every resistance that has been colonized by power is thus destined to lose.

However, it seems very difficult. Even though resistance exists while there is no capability to fight, this does not necessarily mean that they are always destined to be defeated continuously by power. Every individual who has power cannot be understood only in the context of the relationship between individuals and certain groups, or as a relationship of violent action or discrimination. The entire structure of actions carried out by the ruler, people will continue to push, seduce, make it easier or complicate someone extremely by limiting or prohibiting absolutely cruelly.

In this study, the writers found the reflection of sovereign power and its resistance implicitly from the film *Wonka* (2023). This film is about Wonka as the protagonist who comes to Galleries Gourmet to sell chocolate. Wonka faces some challenges in selling his chocolate because of the Chocolate Cartel prevent him. Then, Wonka can open a store with help of his friends but the chocolate cartel sabotaged his store. The reflection of the sovereign power comes from the Chocolate Cartel, and Wonka struggles to resist the power.

As of the era development, film is mostly reflected the society nowadays. The choice of themes, stories, and characters, a film may reflect life reality (Wardaniningsih & Kasih, 2022). In general, film uses signs and symbols to construct meaning that is reflecting society values. Therefore, in understanding how signs and symbols are constructed to create meaning in a film, a linguistics subject that focuses on signs is called semiotics. It is a broad field of study of how meaning of signs is constructed and its interpretation from reality (Chandler, 2007). All of which are semiotic signs that people often encounter and have many different functions from various aspects of each person's perspective in interpreting them. Also, semiotic encompasses objects, words, sound, and images that create meaning.

In revealing the reflection of sovereign power and its resistance from film *Wonka* (2023), the writers applied Roland Barthes' semiotics. Barthes proposed denotation and connotation in how sign is created meaning. Denotation and connotation are terms that describe the relationship between the signifier and its signified, and the distinction is made between the first two types of signified, namely denotative signifiers and connotative signified. Meanings that include denotation and connotation. Denotation here tends to be described as the literal or definitional, clear, or easily understood meaning of a sign. While, a connotation can create an illusion of denotation, in the form of a signifier and a signified that are the same thing and are transparent. (Barthes, 1974, as cited in Chandler, 2007).

In supporting this study, the writers conduct some previous studies to show the gap in this study. The first study was conducted by Dianiya (2020) from *Profetik Jurnal Komunikasi*, volume 13 issue 02, entitled “Representation of Social Class in Film (Semiotic Analysis of Roland Barthes Film *Parasite*)”. This study aims to find the social class differences in the film *Parasite*. The study used critical interpretative as the method and Barthes semiotic analysis. The data analysis found that there are 5 points that represent social class in the film.

The second study was conducted by Maharani et al. (2022) entitled “Representation of Racism in Antebellum Movie Semiotic analysis of Roland Barthes”. This article was published in the *Journal of Pedagogy and Education Science*, volume 01 issue 01. This study aim is to discuss the racism from the white people towards black people throughout the movie. This study uses descriptive qualitative method and Roland Barthes semiotic analysis. In the analysis result, the black people have struggle with the discrimination from white people.

The third study was conducted by Ariani et al. (2024) from *Jurnal Karya Ilmiah Mahasiswa Pusat Penerbitan & Publikasi Ilmiah* volume 03 issue 01, entitled “Analysis Semiotic of Roland Barthes About Representation of Beauty Privilege in The Movie ‘Sierra Burgess Is a Loser’” The study's objective is to find out how the beauty privilege issue is depicted in the movie “Sierra Burgess is a Loser”. This study uses qualitative descriptive method and Roland Barthes semiotic

theory. In analysis result, the beauty privilege is regarded as valuable in society to get special treatment.

In comparing with the previous studies, this study has a similar in understanding social issue depicted from film by applying Barthes semiotic analysis. This study also uses a descriptive qualitative method, same with Maharani et al. (2022) and Ariani et al. (2024) studies. However, Dianiya (2020) and Maharani et al. (2022) uses 'myth' in data analysis while this study is not. Also, the object of this study is also different. Thus, it can be said that there is a gap in this study with other previous study.

METHOD

The research utilizes a descriptive-qualitative approach to investigate the relevant issues. This method integrates aspects of both descriptive and qualitative research. Manjunatha (2019) describes the descriptive method as one that presents data exploration statements as reported by the researcher, without the influence of external variables. In essence, descriptive research seeks to describe, identify, and clarify the nature of an event, object, or phenomenon. As Nassaji (2015) points out, this type of research is primarily concerned with "what" has occurred rather than "how" or "why" it happened.

The qualitative method is defined by its aim to collect non-numerical data for analysis. Its purpose is to gain deeper insights into social phenomena within their natural settings. Ugwu & Val (2023) argue that this research method evaluates opinions, perspectives, and characteristics that cannot be effectively examined through quantitative approaches.

In this study, data is gathered from *Wonka* movie directed by Paul King (2023). The writers collect data by carefully observing the movie to identify evidence of power relations and power resistance experienced by the characters in the movie. Before analyzing the collected data, it is first extracted and organized to clarify the issues relevant to the study focus. The writers then reference various articles and journals related to power relations and power resistance topics, using these sources to analyze the data and reveal the themes of power relations and power resistance faced by the characters. Finally, the study compiles the analysis into a research paper and concludes by summarizing the power issues presented in the story.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION***Sovereign Power***

Scene 1. The chief of the Police is torturing Wonka.

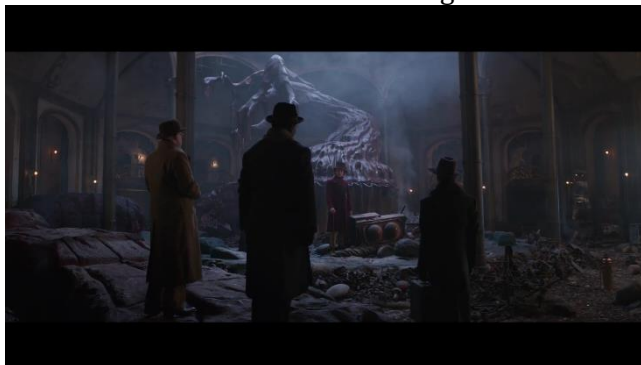


Denotation: The chief of the police is immersing Wonka's head in the fountain and telling him to stop sell chocolate. It takes place at the heart of the city in the middle of the night.

Connotation: The use of violence and threat reflects the use of fear to control others, also a misuse of authority by the chief of the police. The chief of the police does it in the middle of the night to avoid any witnesses.

The Scene 1 shows the oppressive efforts from the chief of the police, he is threatening Wonka to not sell chocolate anymore. In fact, the Chocolate Cartel bribed the chief of the police to give threat to Wonka. The chocolate cartel regards Wonka as a threat for their chocolate business in Galleries Gourmet. The chief of the police uses violence by putting Wonka's head in the water while repeating the message from the chocolate cartel. It can be seen from the chief of the police's dialogue, "do not sell chocolate in this town" [0:47:37 - 0:47:39]. Also, the title 'Chief' reflects the high position as a law enforcement. It gives a sense for the people who carry that title have the authority, that allow them to oppress others. The connotation of the act from the chief of the police reveal that the Chocolate Cartel utilises his authority to gain their purpose. It is correlated with Sovereign power proposed by Foucault, the Chocolate Cartel tends to stop Wonka from selling his chocolate through the chief of the police. By utilizing Barthes's theory, the reflection of sovereign power is shown implicitly from the chocolate cartel. It helps to examine the implied meaning from Scene 1.

Scene 2. The Chocolate Cartel sabotages Wonka's store.



Denotation: The Chocolate Cartel comes to Wonka's store after its burned.

Connotation: The contradiction of the numbers from the Chocolate Cartel and Wonka implies power imbalance, it reflects oppression and intimidation.

The Scene 2 shows another effort from the Chocolate Cartel to stop Wonka from selling chocolate. Beforehand, that is the day of Wonka's store opening. It goes smoothly until Wonka's chocolate cause a side effect to the customers. The Chocolate Cartel intentionally sabotages Wonka's store because they do not want Wonka disturb their chocolate business. It ends up with chaos and the store is burned. The Chocolate Cartel do it by themselves since the last time the

chief of the police failed to stop Wonka. The connotation analysis from the Scene 2 shows the sovereign power from the Chocolate Cartel, they want to show him who is the most powerful between them by destroy Wonka's store. They will do anything to stop Wonka at all cost.

Scene 3. The Chocolate Cartel forces Wonka to go



Denotation: The Chocolate Cartel escorts Wonka to get on the ship.

Connotation: The Chocolate Cartel tends to eliminate Wonka with a bomb on the ship. It reflects their dominance and control towards Wonka.

In the Scene 3, the Chocolate Cartel finally success to kick Wonka from the Galleries Gourmet. The Chocolate Cartel threatens Wonka to get on the ship and leave Galleries Gourmet in exchange to pay his friends debt. In fact, the Chocolate Cartel has a plan to eliminate Wonka by planting a bomb on the ship, so Wonka will not come back forever. The connotation analysis reflects the sovereign power from the Chocolate Cartel vividly, they pretend to be kind by escorting Wonka for his departure but actually they want to eliminate him. It is because they see Wonka as a big threat for their business. The Chocolate Cartel wants Wonka to stop selling chocolate anywhere by ending his life.

Resistance Sovereign Power

Scene 4. Wonka plans to fight the Chocolate Cartel with his friends.



Denotation: Wonka, Abacus, Larry, and Lottie are saving Noodle from a bird cage.

Connotation: It reflects their hope for freedom and desire for future.

In this scene, it shows the beginning of resistance against the sovereign power from the Chocolate Cartel and the chief of the police. Wonka and his friends are rescuing Noodle from the bird cage and discussing for a plan to fight against the chocolate cartel. They know that the Chocolate Cartel kept their cashflow record hidden in the storage under the Church, it can be seen from Wonka's dialogue, "Abacus, you said the Cartel keep a record of all their dirty deeds" [1:24:11 - 11:24:13]. They are planning to reveal that record as crime evidence of the chocolate cartel. The connotation analysis reflects their rebellion towards the Chocolate Cartel, to reach their purpose and to end the sovereign power.

Scene 5. Wonka and Noodle sneak into the Chocolate Cartel's storage.



Denotation: Wonka and Noodle hide on the elevator waiting for the guard to pass out.

Connotation: The guard reflects that place is valuable.

In the Scene 5, Wonka and Noodle are trying to get in the storage. Based on their information, the dirty record of the Chocolate Cartel is hidden there. They face a guard waiting in front of the door, which means that they are in the right place. Beforehand, Wonka put a chocolate in the elevator for the guard as if that is a present. Then, the guard eat it, unknowingly that chocolate have a side effect to make the guard sleep. The connotation analysis indirectly tells that place is the storage Wonka and Noodle looking for. It is most certainly impossible for a valuable place is not guarded. Thus, Scene 5 is part of their plan in resistance the sovereign power by the Chocolate Cartel.

Scene 6. Wonka and Noodle found the record of the Chocolate Cartel



Denotation: Wonka and Noodle found the dirty record, but the Chocolate Cartel get in there on time.

Connotation: The Chocolate Cartel catches Wonka and Noodle reflect the fear for the record get leak to public.

The Scene 6 shows a prevention effort from the Chocolate Cartel. Wonka and Noodle success to found the dirty record, but the Chocolate Cartel catches them before they can escape. The connotation analysis tells that record's content is confidential. It can be seen the Chocolate Cartel comes to the storage quickly, even Wonka and Noodle is not there for too long. The Chocolate Cartel does not want the record leak to public, because it can be the fall down of their business and get arrested. Wonka and Noodle are nearly success to bring the record with them, as their resistance towards the sovereign power by the Chocolate Cartel.

The Result of Sovereign Power Resistance

Scene 7. Wonka and Noodle success to bring the dirty record.



Denotation: Noodle hand over the Chocolate Cartel's record to the police and Wonka seems relieved.

Connotation: Wonka's relieved gesture reflect a victory for their effort to fight the Chocolate Cartel.

In the Scene 7, Wonka and Noodle success to bring the dirty record and hand it to the police as crime evidence of the Chocolate Cartel. Beforehand, the Chocolate Cartel caught them stealing their record and tend to drown them in their chocolate. However, they can survive and take back the record. The connotation analysis shows that the end moment of the Chocolate Cartel's dominance in chocolate business. It is their victory against the Chocolate Cartel. Wonka achieves his goal to cut down the Chocolate Cartel's power.

Scene 8. Wonka celebrates the winning with Chocolate.



Denotation: A large amount of chocolate shoots out from the fountain with Wonka and the people of Galleries Gourmet.

Connotation: The chocolate flowing, Wonka's gesture and the people presence reflect a celebration of the fall down the Chocolate Cartel's dominance.

In the Scene 8, Wonka and people of Galleries Gourmet are celebrating with chocolate. The chocolate that shoots out from the fountain is actually from the Chocolate Cartel's storage. Wonka and his friend intentionally leak out the chocolate to show that the large amount of chocolate symbolizes luxury and the dominance of the Chocolate Cartel before. It creates a joyful atmosphere around people. Everyone is celebrating the fall down of the Chocolate Cartel. Wonka proves his point that he is doing the right thing, as before people doubt his chocolate.

Scene 9. Wonka build a chocolate factory.



Denotation: Wonka and Oompa Loompa walking around the chocolate factory.

Connotation: The chocolate factory is the result of Wonka's resistance towards the Chocolate Cartel.

Scene 9 shows the successful of achieving Wonka's dream. Beforehand, he cannot even open a store of chocolate because of the Chocolate Cartel prevent him. At the end of the story, Wonka build a chocolate factory by the help of Oompa Loompa. The connotation analysis reveals that the sovereign power by the Chocolate Cartel is not exist anymore. Wonka is freely to sell or produce chocolate without any prevention from others. Eventually, with help from friends, Wonka can have the freedom as a result of his resistance.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study highlights how the film *Wonka* portrays power relations, particularly the interplay of sovereign power and resistance. By analyzing significant scenes from the movie and applying Roland Barthes' theory of denotation and connotation, the research reveals how various forms of power manifested through violence, authority, and control are symbolically represented, while highlighting the resilience of characters who resist oppressive forces. The film's depiction of Willy Wonka's journey from being subjected to the oppressive control of a powerful chocolate cartel to ultimately challenging and overcoming this dominance offers a poignant reflection of broader socio-political themes. The narrative highlights the transformative power of resistance, illustrating how individuals and communities can rise against authority in pursuit of freedom and change. This study not only discovers how power relations are represented in visual media but also demonstrates how such portrayals in *Wonka* offer critical insights into the nature of power, the consequences of its abuse, and the potential for social and political change. In doing so, it underscores the capacity of film to act as both a medium for social critique and a platform for envisioning alternate power structures, providing a deeper understanding of the intersection of power, resistance, and storytelling in contemporary cinema.

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