

## Symbolic Representations of Social Criticism in Us (2019)

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### ABSTRACT

The evolution of media, particularly electronic and audio-visual media such as film, has provided an effective platform for conveying social criticism implicitly through symbolic elements. This research attempts to examine the social criticism signs in the *Us* (2019) film, by using Roland Barthes's semiotics theory and the concept of social criticism by David Harvey as the theoretical framework. The research method that used in this research is descriptive qualitative. The writer found there were four objects which become social criticism signs that the writer gets based on several objects that were attached to the *Tethered* throughout this film. The four objects are scissors, bunker, rabbit and the red color. In the analysis, the connotative signs of the four objects have an important role for understanding what forms of social criticism that experienced by the *Tethered* in this film. Scissors which have a connotative sign "get a freedom", is a symbol of social criticism regarding social oppression. Bunker which has a connotative sign "significant gap between upper-class and lower-class", is a symbol of social criticism regarding social and economic inequality. Rabbit which has a connotative sign "undervalued", is a symbol of social criticism regarding social discrimination. Red color which has a connotative sign "resistance", is a symbol of social criticism regarding resistance to social injustice. Based on the explanation, it can be concluded that these four signs have an important role to understand the social criticism that related to capitalism ideology in this film. This research contributes to the understanding of how films can serve as potent vehicles for social criticism by decoding implicit signs that symbolize complex socio-economic issues.

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## INTRODUCTION

The various kinds of social problems that disturb the society will underlie the emergence of social criticism. Social criticism has an important role in our social life because it can lead to social change that has a positive impact. Social criticism can be defined as a form of communication in society that controls how a social system or social process can run successfully (Akbar, 2016). In general, the most common social problems that found in our society are poverty, juvenile delinquency and crime. However, it is not only that, there are many more of social problems that occur in our society, such as social problems which related to government politics, environmental problems, racism and also social problems that related to religion. Criticizing social problems is an innovation, which means giving criticism can be one of the ways to communicating new ideas as well as revising old ideas, if they are considered to be unable to have a significant positive impact in realizing social change (Hirvonen, 2019).

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According to Bertens, problems and criticism have a very close relationship if we wanted some positive changes, so they cannot be separated. Many years ago, criticism was sometimes seen as something negative by some people because it was often uttered the ugliness and shortcomings of other people. However, in this modern life, criticism is considered more positive, because criticism is considered to emphasize constructive comments and conveyed it in a polite manner. Therefore, social criticism that exists at this time is expected to bring a change that has a positive impact on all groups of people (Bertens, 2002).

Along with the development of technology, if we viewed from its effectiveness, then the most suitable media to use in conveying a social criticism is electronic media, which can display an audio-visual. One of the mass electronic media that can display audio-visual is film (Virginás, 2020). According its function as a mass communication media that displays audio-visual, film is the most appropriate for conveying social criticism. However, in general, social criticism that conveyed through a film is usually shown implicitly not explicitly, that is why many viewers are usually not aware of its existence. A director when conveying social criticism in a film, usually symbolizes and inserts it into the elements of a film in his own way so that it doesn't look too explicit to avoid some misunderstandings that can offend certain parties. Therefore, to find and understand the social criticism in a film, further analysis of the film is needed in order to find out certain signs or symbols that represent social criticism (Ristiasari & Kaprisma, 2021).

Semiotics itself comes from the Greek word "semione", which when translated into English it means "sign". According to Roland Barthes (1994), semiotics can be defined as the study of signs, which means semiotics includes the main theory regarding how are the signs represent objects, ideas, situations, circumstances, feelings, and so on. Apart from that, signs are usually understood as a symbol that are determined through in-depth interpretation and relating them to the existing reality. In this case, interpreting signs will involve a process of learning and growing along with the self-understanding that exists in life. Roland Barthes divides semiotics into the form of signifier and signified and next, the signifier and signified is identified into denotative and connotative forms (Allen, 2004).

A social criticism would be suitable to be conveyed in any film genre and does not look at a particular genre to be able to convey it. Some examples of films that contained social criticism is *Snowpiercer* (2013), *The Platform* (2019), *Parasite* (2019) and the *Hunger Games* franchise (2012-2015). Some of these films raise the theme of disputes caused by differences in social status or social class, and there are also many satires that are appropriate to the reality of what was happening around them at that time. Reflecting on several of these films, social criticism in films has its own special attraction for the director who worked on it, because the directors hope that the films they made could not only be used as an entertainment but also could be used as a moral message for the audience.

In line with some of the films that mentioned above, *Us* (2019) is also one of the films that contains many social criticisms. *Us* is a film directed by Jordan Peele which was released in 2019 and for now this film can be watched via Apple TV+ platform. *Us* (2019) is a horror-thriller genre film that takes the theme of doppelganger terror. The word "doppelganger" comes from the German word "doppel" which means "double/twin" and "gänger" which means "walker". However, the literal meaning of the term doppelganger believed by the public is a reflection of someone who walks simultaneously (Erkan, 2015). But in this film, the doppelganger is called with another name, namely "Tethered".

The present study uniquely focuses on the implicit social criticism embedded in the film *Us* (2019) through a detailed semiotic analysis based on Roland Barthes's theory and David Harvey's concept of social criticism, emphasizing four specific symbolic objects (scissors, bunker, rabbit, and red color) as representations of social oppression, economic inequality, social discrimination, and resistance. This approach contrasts with prior research which, while also employing semiotic frameworks, diverges in focus and scope.

For instance, the study by Irfan Hadi and Nia Liska Saputri (2020) analyzes social criticism in the documentary *Miss Americana* using John Fiske's semiotic technique, highlighting explicit political and personal empowerment themes conveyed through interviews and reality show formats. Similarly, Vidi Rutsyamsun et al. (2023) apply Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic theory to *Forrest Gump* (1994), focusing on social criticism related to individual marginalization and societal reflection, but without a concentrated analysis of symbolic objects or socio-economic ideology. Ahmadgoli and Yazdanjoo (2019) investigate *A Separation* (2011) through a social semiotic lens to reveal fractured interpersonal and gendered social discourses within Iranian society, emphasizing cultural and religious tensions rather than capitalist socio-economic critique. Meanwhile, Fonseca et al. (2023) explore the animation *Purl* (2018) from a sociointeractional semiotic perspective, addressing sexism and educational implications, which broadens the semiotic application but differs in thematic content and media form.

The current research thus fills a niche by integrating Barthes's layered semiotic analysis with David Harvey's critique of capitalist ideology, focusing on how implicit signs within a horror-thriller film articulate complex socio-economic and class struggles symbolized through tangible objects associated with the *Tethered*. This offers a nuanced understanding of social criticism as myth-making within popular cinema, a dimension less explicitly addressed in the aforementioned studies.

However, gaps remain. The current study is limited to qualitative descriptive analysis of a single film, potentially restricting generalizability. It also primarily interprets signs from a capitalist ideology perspective, which may overlook intersectional dimensions such as race, gender, or other identity markers that could enrich the social criticism discourse. Furthermore, while the study decodes symbolic objects, it does not extensively examine audience reception or the effectiveness of these signs in influencing social awareness or change.

Based on the explanation above, the writer is interested in using *Us* (2019) film as the object of the research. This film is interesting for the writer because it contains many implicit messages which are conveyed through various signs. Some of the social criticism conveyed by the director in this film is also very interesting to study further because it is related to social criticism in socio-economic context which is many occurred in our reality and also for the audience that can use it as a moral message if they understand what social criticism is contained in this film. The writer will focus his research on how the issue of social criticism is depicted through the signs in *Us* (2019) film by analyzing this film using Roland Barthes's semiotics theory.

## METHOD

The writer used descriptive qualitative analysis method to analyze *Us* (2019) film. According to Moleong (2017), descriptive qualitative methodology is a research procedure that produces descriptive data in the form of written or spoken words from people and

observable behavior. In this method, the writer will describe the existing issues of social criticism and try to reveal some implicit messages that contain elements of social criticism in it. The writer uses qualitative methods because it is in accordance with the techniques used to analyze the research corpus and the issues in it. After the answers to these research questions have been found, the writer will present them into the research results. The limitations of the current research method include restricted generalizability due to a single-case focus, potential subjectivity in data interpretation, lack of audience reception analysis, thematic concentration on capitalist ideology to the exclusion of other social dimensions, and limited theoretical plurality.

The writer is the main instrument for analyzing the film *Us* (2019) by watching it repeatedly on his smartphone via Apple TV+ platform. The writer also watched it in depth to better understand some of the issues of social criticism that were implied in this film and was assisted by searching for several articles on the internet about the discussion of social criticism contained in this film. In this research, the data to be collected from the film *Us* (2019) primarily consist of visual and verbal elements—specifically, scenes, objects, and dialogues—that implicitly convey social criticism. The writer gathers evidence by repeatedly watching the film via the Apple TV+ platform, focusing on identifying symbolic objects attached to the Tethered characters that function as signs.

The data collection technique used in this study was done by watching the film *Us* repeatedly and the writer collected as much evidence as possible from several scenes or dialogues that depict social criticism. In analyzing the data, this research conducted two theories, Barthes's Semiotic and Harvey's socio-economic. The use of Roland Barthes's semiotics theory in analyzing the data involves a two-tiered process of signification. First, the writer identifies the denotative meaning (the literal or explicit meaning) of each object, such as scissors being a cutting tool, a bunker as an underground shelter, a rabbit as a small animal, and red as a primary color resembling blood. Second, the connotative meaning (the implicit or symbolic meaning) is interpreted, revealing deeper social criticism embedded within these signs. The concept of social criticism, guided by David Harvey's socio-economic framework, is applied to interpret these connotative signs as reflections of capitalist ideology and class struggle.

## FINDING AND DISCUSSION

### Finding

#### Analysis of Objects Which Become Signs in *Us* (2019) film

Overall, the writer considers that the scissors, bunker, rabbit and the red color of the Tethered's uniform are objects that can be used as a sign because they have implicit meanings. The writer chooses these four objects as a sign because the writer considers that these four objects are the most suitable and have a correlation with social criticism. The four signs are obtained from several objects that are attached to the Tethered and often appear throughout this film. The next step is to analyze the four signs using Roland Barthes's semiotics theory by finding and describing the first signification or denotative meaning and also interpreting the second signification or connotative meaning to find its correlation with social criticism.

## Scissors

The first objects is a scissors. According to the Cambridge English Dictionary, scissors are defined as a tool that used for cutting, which consist a two blade and two hollow handles for inserting fingers. Apart from being a tool used for cutting in our daily lives, scissors can also be used as a very dangerous weapon if we use it to fight or defend ourselves. In this film, when Red has found the right time to lead all of the Tethered out from the underground, scissors become the main weapon that carried by all the Tethered when they are preparing to kill the people above ground.

1. Signifier Scissors	2. Signified A tool that used for cutting, which consist a two blade and two hollow handles	DENNOTATIVE
3. Denotative Sign <i>I. Signifier</i> Something that can be used to cut the bond		CONNOTATIVE
<i>II. Signified</i> Being free and unbound		
<i>III. Connotative Sign</i> Get a freedom		

Figure 1 the signification of a scissor

From the Figure 1, it shows the signification of a scissor. For the first signification, the writer describes a tool that used for cutting, which consist a two blade and two hollow handles as the denotative signified. Then, something that can be used to cut the bond are described as a sign for the first signification as well as a connotative signifier for the second signification. Next, for the connotative signified, it described as being free and unbound. From overall the first and the second signification, the writer finally gets a connotative sign of a scissors, namely get a freedom. The implicit meaning of a scissors which is not just being used as a weapon by the Tethered, but a scissors also have an implicit meaning that symbolizes the urges and struggle of the Tethered to get a freedom of life.

Based on the signification of a scissor and the Tethered's struggle to get a free life, it can be concluded that a scissors is an object which becomes a sign to symbolized the Tethered's effort on achieving a freedom. The Tethered have not been able to live a free life because their destiny seems to be "bonded" to the destiny of the humans who live above the ground. And also, as long as the humans above the ground are still alive, the Tethered will forever just to follow whatever the humans above the ground do. In other words, when all the humans above the ground are dead, and since then the Tethered will be able to experience a free, happy and decent life. Therefore, the writer considers that a scissors are an object that becomes a sign. Because, apart from just being used as a weapon by the Tethered, scissors are also having an implicit meaning which symbolizes the Tethered's struggle and urges to get a freedom of life.



## Bunker

The next object is an underground place where the Tethered live, which in this research, the writer called it a bunker, because based on its function in this film, the place fits with the definition of a bunker that the writer has found. According to the Cambridge English Dictionary, Bunker can be defined as a shelter that is usually built underground and has a strong wall to protect the people inside it. In real life, a bunker can usually be found in an area that was once used as a battlefield. Because, a bunker is usually used as a safehouse for soldiers who are at war. Therefore, a bunker is usually built in underground and hidden, so that it can be used as a safe place for soldiers and also used as a place to store an ammunition or weapons that will being used for war. But in this film, the bunker is shown like an underground tunnel with a length of a thousand miles that originated from an abandoned subway system, unused service routes and also an abandoned mine shafts and in the end the place is used as a place for the Tethered to live.

1. Signifier Bunker	2. Signified A hidden place that built in underground and it is usually used by people for the shelter	DENOTATIVE
3. Denotative Sign <i>I. Signifier</i> A place that is located in underground and it is isolated from above the ground life		CONNOTATIVE
<i>II. Signified</i> There are two social class, upper-class and the lower-class		
<i>III. Connotative Sign</i> Significant gap between upper-class and lower-class		

Figure 2 the signification of a bunker

From the Figure 2, it shows the signification of a bunker. For the first signification, the writer describes a hidden place that built in underground and it is usually used by people for the shelter as a denotative signified. Then, a place that is located in underground and it is isolated from above the ground life, are described as a sign for the first signification as well as a connotative signifier for the second signification. Next, for the connotative signified, it describes there are two social class, upper- class and the lower-class. From overall the first and second signification, the writer finally gets a connotative sign of a bunker, which symbolizes the significant gap between upper-class and lower- class. Apart from being a place for the Tethered to live, the bunker also has another meaning that depicted the differences of lives between the upper-class and the lower-class and at the same time it's also symbolizes the Tethered as people from the lower class.

Based on the signification of a bunker, it can be concluded that the bunker where the Tethered live is an object which becomes a sign, to symbolize the significant gap between upper-class and lower- class. It is also in accordance with the description of the Tethered in this film, where the Tethered shown living with a very poor life and also, they cannot have

a decent or a proper life like humans who live above the ground. The depiction of Red and Adelaide Wilson in this film are also very suitable to symbolize that Red is a representation of lower-class people while Adelaide Wilson is a representation of upper-class people. There are also several dialogues and scenes that shows Red as a Tethered, have a very much opposite life destinies throughout their life if compared to Adelaide Wilson's life. Therefore, the writer considers that the bunker is an object which becomes a sign. Because apart from being a place for the Tethered to live, the bunker also has an implicit meaning that can symbolize the significant life differences between Adelaide Wilson (upper-class) and Red (lower-class).

### *Rabbit*

The next object is a rabbit. Rabbits are one of the objects that seem very attached to the Tethered throughout the film. According to the Oxford Learners Dictionary, rabbits are defined as a small animal that has a soft fur, long ears and short tails. In everyday life, rabbits are usually kept as a pet by humans because rabbits are considered as a tame and cute animal. However, rabbits are also often used as an experimental animal in laboratories because they are not aggressive and have small bodies so they do not take up much space. In this film, rabbits are the only living creatures that live side by side with the Tethered in underground.

1. Signifier Rabbit	2. Signified Small animal that has a soft fur, long ears and short tail	DENOTATIVE
3. Denotative Sign <i>I. Signifier</i> An animal that is often used as an experimental material by humans		II. Signified Considered undervalued and easy to be exploited
		CONNOTATIVE
		III. Connotative Sign Undervalued

Figure 3 the signification of a rabbit

From the Figure 3, it shows the signification of a rabbit. For the first signification, the writer describes a small animal that has a soft fur, long ears and short tail as a denotative signified. Then, an animal that is often used as an experimental material by humans, are described as a sign of the first signification as well as a connotative signifier for the second signification. Next, for the connotative signified, it describes considered undervalued and easy to be exploited. From overall the first and the second signification, the writer finally gets a connotative sign of a rabbit, which is undervalued. Apart from being the only animal that lives side by side with the Tethered in underground, rabbits also have another meaning in this film which symbolizes the Tethered is considered undervalued.

Based on the signification of a rabbit and the dialogue spoken by Red in the scene above, it seems to strongly illustrate that rabbits is a representation of Tethered as a creature whose considered undervalue. This is in accordance with what Red explained to Adelaide Wilson

at the scene above. Red explains that the Tethered originally are an experiment creature which created by humans. However, this experiment turns failed, which caused the Tethered to be considered as a failure and they were abandoned in some hidden place in underground. Basically, if a living creature is being used as an experimental material, it indicates that the creature is considered undervalued or trivial. In addition, in the scene above, Red also explains after being considered as a failure, the Tethered were abandoned for so long even they went crazy down there. Based on this explanation, the writer believes that apart from being the only living creature that lives side by side with the Tethered in underground, rabbits also have implicit meanings that can symbolize the Tethered as a creature that is considered undervalued.

### Red Color

The last object that the writer would like to analyze is the red color from the uniforms that worn by the Tethered. According to Dictionary.com, red can be defined as a primary color that resembles the color of blood. When we viewed from a point of view of philosophic, red is a color that contain some sharp implicit meanings and it is often used to symbolized certain ideologist. In this film, the red color that the writer will analyze is referred to the color of the uniforms that worn by the Tethered when they decided to come out from underground.

1. Signifier Red Color	2. Signified A primary color that resembles the color of blood and usually used to symbolized implicit meanings	DENOTATIVE
3. Denotative Sign I. Signifier A color that symbolizes the meaning of resistance and revolution of class struggle from the perspective of socialism ideology		II. Signified A form of resistance is necessary to obtain a freedom
III. Connotative Sign Resistance		CONNOTATIVE

Figure 4 the signification of a red color

From the Figure 4, it shows the signification of a red color. For the first signification, it describes a primary color that resembles the color of blood and usually used to symbolized implicit meanings as a dennotative signified. Then, color that symbolizes the meaning of resistance and revolution of class struggle from the perspective of socialism ideology, are described as a sign of the first signification as well as a connotative signifier for the second signification. Next, for the connotative signified, it describes a form of resistance is necessary to obtain a freedom. From overall the first and the second signification, the writer finally gets a connotative sign of the red color, which symbolized a form of resistance. Apart from being the color of the uniform worn by the Tethered, the red color also has another meaning



that symbolizes a form of resistance which carried out by the Tethered against humans who live above the ground with the purpose of getting the life they want. Based on the signification of a red color, it can be concluded that the red color from the uniform worn by the Tethered is an object that becomes a sign in this film that symbolize a form of the Tethered's resistance. It shows that as long as the Tethered live in underground, they always wear the exact same clothes as the people who live above the ground. The Tethered began wearing the red uniform just when they decided to come out from the underground and start terrorizing the people who lives above the ground.

Based on the explanation, the writer believes that the terror which carried out by the Tethered is a form of resistance that have a purpose to make the Tethered get a freedom and escape from the terrible life destiny which they have been experiencing all this time. If linked to the storyline of this film, then the meaning of a red color as a symbol of resistance will be very appropriate because the Tethered wear the red uniform only when they start terrorizing humans who live above the ground. This is also very much in line with the definition of a red color in the perspective of the socialism ideology that explained by David Harvey. According to David Harvey in his book, in the perspective of socialist ideology, the red color has a close relationship with the symbolism of resistance and revolution of class struggle. Which in this case, it refers to the flag of the communist movement that has a red background on their flag and also the red flag of the Uni Soviet (Harvey, 2008). Therefore, the writer believes that the red color from the uniform that wore by the Tethered has an implicit meaning that symbolized the form of resistance which carried out by the Tethered.

### **Analysis of Myth and Social Criticism in Us (2019) film**

Based on the findings of the analysis that the writer has explained above, the writer finally managed to find out the connotative signs of these four signs. In the field of semiotics theory, Roland Barthes (1994) explains that myth is a meaning that formed from ideological concepts which exist around us and provide an additional layer of meaning to a sign. Roland Barthes (1994) explains that myth refers to the second signification, which in this case refers to the connotative sign as the basis of myth production (Zhou, 2011). Based on this explanation, the writer knows that the myth that formed from the four connotative signs will bring up a form of ideology that is in accordance with the concept of social criticism of the socio-economic context.

### **Scissors**

Based on the writer's interpretation and the signification scheme of a scissor, the writer finds that the scissors in this film is a symbol that has an implicit meaning as a form of desire and struggle of the Tethered to "get a freedom". The unfree life that the Tethered have been living all this time is caused by the existence of a "bond" that is connected between the Tethered and the humans who live above the ground. In other words, it can be understood that as long as the humans above the ground are still alive, the Tethered will forever not be able to live free life because the destiny of the Tethered's lives will always be connected and follow the destiny of the humans who live above the ground. Therefore, this is the main reason why the Tethered want to kill all humans who live above the ground. Based on the explanation above and the connotative signs of scissors that has found as a depiction of the desire and struggle of the tethered to "get a freedom". The scissors thus become an emblem of resistance against structural domination, reflecting the Marxist notion of alienation and

the fight to reclaim agency. The scissors' connotation as a tool to sever ties resonates with the ideological critique of oppressive capitalist systems that maintain hierarchical control by binding marginalized groups to subordinate roles. The writer concludes that scissors can be a representation of social criticism regarding social oppression. This is in line with the definition of oppression which stated by Graham McFee in his book, oppression is an unfair and sustainable action that is very detrimental to a certain individual or group of people by exploiting, controlling and limiting access to resources, rights and opportunities (McFee, 2011).

### *Bunker*

Based on the writer's interpretation and the signification scheme of a bunker, the writer finds that the bunker in this film is a symbol that has an implicit meaning that depicts "significant gap between upper-class and lower-class". This depiction is very much illustrated through the difference between the lives which experienced by Red in underground and Adelaide Wilson who lives above the ground.

The life of Red and her family is described as very inadequate because they do not have access to their needs and desires, cannot eat food that is suitable for consumption, and do not have valuable assets, that is why Red and his family are shown as a depiction of a lower-class people. Meanwhile, the life of Adelaide Wilson's family is described as having a comfortable life, having a beautiful house, having valuable property and sufficient wealth, having a harmonious family, and having children who excel because they have talents that are supported by their parents; therefore, Adelaide Wilson and her family are shown as a depiction of an upper-class people. Based on the explanation above and the connotative signs of the bunker that the writer has found as a depiction of "significant gap between upper-class and lower-class". The writer concludes that the bunker can be a representation of social criticism regarding social and economic inequality. The writer concludes this because we are clearly shown that there is a significant gap between the lives lived by upper-class people (Adelaide Wilson's family) and lower-class people (Red's family). Moreover, the bunker thus critiques the capitalist urban geography that physically and symbolically marginalizes the lower class, reinforcing the myth of meritocracy while exposing its fallacy. The juxtaposition of Red's poor life with Adelaide Wilson's affluent existence dramatizes this inequality, underscoring the systemic barriers that perpetuate class stratification. Also, this is in accordance with the definition which stated by Joseph E. Stiglitz in his book, he defines social and economic inequality as a very significant differences between the upper-class and lower-class which includes several aspects such as social status, wealth or income, rights, and opportunities in gaining access to economic growth and capital resources so that causing obstacles to social mobility (Stiglitz, 2012).

### *Rabbit*

Based on the writer's interpretation and the signification scheme of a rabbit, the writer finds that the rabbit in this film is a symbol that has an implicit meaning that describes the Tethered as "undervalued" creatures. The writer considers that rabbits and the Tethered indirectly have something in common, which is as a creature that are used as an experimental material because they are seen as inferior and worthless. The Tethered were originally an experiment that created by the government in order to control a human life. However, the experiment turn failed which caused the Tethered to be abandoned in some

hidden place in underground until they went crazy. This sign reveals how capitalist systems commodify and instrumentalize marginalized populations, reducing them to mere tools for the benefit of the dominant class. The rabbit's connotation of being "undervalued" reflects Amartya Sen's conceptualization of social discrimination as differential treatment based on social background or status (Sen, 2009). The film's portrayal of the Tethered as failed experiments abandoned underground critiques the social invisibility and stigmatization imposed on disenfranchised groups, highlighting the intersection of class-based and systemic discrimination. Based on the explanation above and the connotative signs of rabbits that the writer has found which depicted the Tethered as a creature who are considered "undervalued", the writer concludes that rabbits can be a representation of social criticism regarding social discrimination. According to Amartya K. Sen, social discrimination can be defined as an action related to treating an individual or group of people in a different way regardless of their social background, social class or social status (Sen, 2009).

### *Red Color*

Based on the writer's interpretation and the signification scheme of a red color, the writer finds that the red color in this film is a symbol that has an implicit meaning as a depiction of the "resistance" which carried out by the Tethered. The Tethered are shown wearing the red uniform only when Red has found the right time to lead all Tethered out from the underground. The purpose of the Tethered coming out from the underground is to fight and kill all humans so that the Tethered will experience a free life and have a life destiny that is not "tethered" by anyone. Based on the explanation above and the connotative signs of the red color that the writer has found as a depiction of "resistance" which carried out by the Tethered, the writer concludes that the red color can be a representation of social criticism regarding resistance to social injustice. This is also very much in line with the definition of resistance towards social injustice which is stated by Bert Klandermans. This sign signifies the Tethered's refusal to accept their subjugation and their active challenge to the capitalist order that confines them. The red color embodies as the mobilization of anger and action against social injustices and inequalities (Klandermans & Van Stekelenburg, 2013). The film's narrative arc, culminating in the Tethered's violent emergence from the underground, dramatizes this resistance as both a desperate assertion of humanity and a critique of systemic exploitation. According to Bert Klandermans, resistance towards social injustice is an action where individuals or certain groups of people felt furious and fight against various treatments of injustices, inequalities that they have been experienced in various aspects of life (Klandermans & Van Stekelenburg, 2013).

Based on the results of social criticism analysis from the four signs that appear in this film, the writer can conclude that each of the four signs is a representation of various forms of social criticism experienced by the Tethered in this film. The writer finds that the scissors as a sign that depicted social criticism regarding social oppression, the bunker as a sign that depicted social criticism regarding social and economic inequality, the rabbit as a sign that depicted social criticism regarding social discrimination and finally, the red color as a sign that depicted social criticism regarding resistance to injustice. The four social criticisms have similarities which related to social criticism in the socio- economic context.

Based on the definition of myth in the study of semiotics which stated by Roland Barthes, and also the purpose of the production of a myth which is to understand the meaning of a

sign more deeply and as a reflection of certain ideological concepts that exist around us, the writer can finally conclude that the myth which produced from the four connotative signs and the analysis of social criticism is depiction of the capitalism ideology. The myth related to the concept of capitalist ideology that the writer has found is the result of an in-depth interpretation of the relationship between the two main points in this analysis, the first is the meaning (connotative sign) that produced from the four signs and the second is representation of social criticism from the four signs. According to George William Domhoff, the ideology of capitalism can be defined as a system that runs in social life where the upper class, who are considered to be owners of capital, will have the right to control over all access to ownership of existing resources, while for the lower class, they are categorized as a group of people who have limitations and their lives will always depend on the upper class. In addition, the upper class will always be seen as superior because they have full control in managing economic circles and resources so that they can control and influence the lives of the lower class (Domhoff, 2010).

## Discussion

The results largely align with expectations in semiotic and socio-economic theory. The scissors symbolize the Tethered's struggle to "get freedom," representing social oppression. This finding is consistent with the film's narrative, where the Tethered are physically and metaphorically bound to the humans above ground, reflecting oppressive power relations that restrict autonomy. The bunker, as an underground shelter, symbolizes the significant socio-economic gap between the upper and lower classes, vividly contrasting the impoverished, confined life of the Tethered with the affluent existence of Adelaide Wilson's family. The rabbit, often used as an experimental animal, connotes the Tethered's undervaluation and social discrimination, highlighting their expendability and marginalization. Finally, the red color worn by the Tethered during their uprising embodies resistance to social injustice, echoing socialist symbolism of class struggle and revolution.

An especially thoughtful insight emerges from the interconnectedness of these signs: "together", they construct a myth that critiques capitalist ideology by exposing systemic oppression, inequality, discrimination, and resistance. This layered semiotic reading reveals that *Us* operates not only as a horror-thriller but also as a socio-political allegory. No unusual or contradictory patterns were detected; rather, the signs coherently reinforce each other to articulate a comprehensive social criticism.

These findings corroborate and extend prior studies on social criticism in film through semiotic analysis. For example, Hadi and Saputri's (2020) analysis of *Miss Americana* also revealed implicit social criticism conveyed through symbolic media elements, emphasizing political empowerment and resistance, particularly from a feminist perspective. Similarly, Rutsyamsun et al. (2023) identified social marginalization themes in *Forrest Gump* via semiotic signs, though their focus was on individual societal reflection rather than systemic class critique. Ahmadgoli and Yazdanjoo's (2019) study of *A Separation* highlighted complex social discourses related to gender and class, showing how semiotics can unpack layered social tensions, paralleling the multi-dimensional critique found in *Us*. The multimodal critique by Al-Abbas et al. (2024) of the short film *Ismail* underscores the importance of visual language in constructing social identities and articulating sociopolitical narratives, particularly within diasporic contexts.

The socio-economic focus of this research aligns closely with Dianiya's (2020) semiotic analysis of *Parasite*, which also used Barthes's framework to reveal class disparities through visual and narrative signs. Both films employ symbolic objects and spatial metaphors (e.g., the bunker in *Us* and the Kim family's semi-basement in *Parasite*) to dramatize inequality and social stratification. Similar to Fonseca et al. (2023), who demonstrate how animation such as *Purl* uses socio-interactional semiotics to address and provoke reflection on sexism within corporate culture, this study confirms that audiovisual media can effectively embed complex social critiques within symbolic elements that invite critical engagement. While Fonseca et al. emphasize the role of multiliteracies and playful yet critical discourse to foster citizenship development, the current research highlights how horror-thriller cinema similarly encodes socio-economic critiques, particularly those related to capitalist ideology, through symbolic objects associated with marginalized characters. Moreover, the red color's symbolism of resistance in *Us* resonates with Harvey's (2008) discussion of socialist iconography, reinforcing the ideological critique embedded in the film's myth.

From these results, it can be deduced that films like *Us* serve as potent cultural texts that encode complex socio-economic critiques through implicit semiotic signs. This suggests that filmmakers can effectively engage audiences in social criticism without overt didacticism, using symbolism to provoke reflection on systemic issues such as capitalism's oppressive structures. Consequently, media literacy education and critical film analysis should emphasize semiotic decoding to uncover these layered meanings, enhancing viewers' awareness of ideological narratives.

Practically, this research recommends that filmmakers consciously incorporate symbolic elements to address social issues, fostering critical engagement while maintaining narrative and aesthetic appeal. For scholars, the study highlights the value of integrating semiotic theory with social criticism frameworks to deepen the interpretive richness of media texts.

In sum, this research confirms that *Us* (2019) employs semiotic signs – scissors, bunker, rabbit, and red color – to articulate multifaceted social criticisms related to oppression, inequality, discrimination, and resistance within a capitalist socio-economic context. These signs collectively construct a myth that critiques systemic power imbalances, situating the film as a significant cultural commentary. The findings align with and build upon previous semiotic analyses of social criticism in film, offering theoretical and practical insights for media studies and social discourse.

## CONCLUSION

This research aims to find out the implicit meaning of social criticism contained in several objects that become signs in this film using Roland Barthes's semiotics theory. The writer finds that there are four signs as a representation of social criticism that experienced by the Tethered. The writer got these four signs based on four objects that were attached to the Tethered throughout this film. The writer analyses this study by describing the denotative meaning as the first signification and then interpreting the connotative meaning as the second signification to find the connotative sign. And finally, the writer analyses these four connotative signs to find out the implicit meaning which related to social criticism contained in the four signs that appear in the *Us* (2019) film.

Based on the results of the writer's analysis using Roland Barthes's semiotics theory, the scissors has a connotative sign as a symbol that depicts the urges and struggle of the Tethered



to “get a freedom”, the bunker has a connotative sign as a symbol that depicts “Significant gap between upper- class and lower-class”, the rabbit has a connotative sign as a symbol that depicts the Tethered as an “undervalued” creatures, and finally the red color has a connotative sign as a symbol that depicts the “resistance” carried out by the Tethered.

Furthermore, the writer finally able to find out the various forms of social criticism that experienced by the Tethered which are implicitly symbolized from the four signs that appear in this film. The first is a scissors which has a connotative sign “get a freedom”, is a symbol of social criticism regarding social oppression. The second is a bunker which has a connotative sign “significant gap between upper- class and lower-class”, is a symbol of social criticism regarding social and economic inequality. The third is a rabbit which has a connotative sign “undervalued”, is a symbol of social criticism regarding social discrimination. And, the fourth is a red color which has a connotative sign “resistance”, is a symbol of social criticism regarding resistance to social injustice. Based on the overall signification analysis; by using Roland Barthes’s semiotics theory regarding the denotative and connotative meanings of a sign, we can finally find out the various forms of social criticism that exist in the *Us* (2019) film. And finally, we can also find out a myth that is produced, which is the depiction of the capitalism ideology.

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