

Representation of Social Inequality in the Film *Shoplifters*: A Semiotic Study of Roland Barthes

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the representation of social inequality in the film *Shoplifters* (2018) by Hirokazu Kore-eda through the lens of Roland Barthes semiotic theory. As an audiovisual medium, film reflects social realities and conveys ideological messages, with *Shoplifters* serving as a poignant depiction of poverty and marginalization. The study explores how *mise-en-scene* elements such as setting, costume, and make up, and camera angles communicate deeper meanings through Barthes three levels of signification: denotation, connotation, and myth. Using a descriptive qualitative method and focusing on two key scenes, the research identifies how the film presents various dimensions of social inequality including economic hardship and social exclusion. The findings reveal that the Shibata family's unconventional structure and survival strategies underscore systemic disparities and challenge dominant societal norms.

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INTRODUCTION

Film is an audiovisual work that combines moving images and sound to tell a story or convey a message to the audience. According to Zoebazary (2016:137), film can be defined as a type of art that narrates stories through audiovisual media. Film has become one of the forms of mass media that plays a role in spreading culture, providing education, delivering various information, and offering entertainment (McQuail, 1983:29). Films are created from story ideas that may originate from imagination, real events, or the personal experiences of the filmmaker. With various genres and styles, films not only serve as entertainment but also act as mirrors of society, reflections of culture, and a medium for delivering social messages (Bordwell & Thompson, 2008:3).

The film *Shoplifters* by Hirokazu Kore-eda portrays social inequality through the story of a poor family who survive by stealing, showing how economic conditions shape their behavior and values. This inequality is depicted in contrast to the more prosperous surrounding society, highlighting the gap between the Shibata family and others. As a visual medium rich in symbols and hidden meanings, film is an appropriate object for analysis using a semiotic approach. This study employs Roland Barthes semiotic theory and *mise-en-scene* elements such as setting, costume, makeup, and camera angles to uncover the visual representation of social inequality in the film's narrative.

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Although previous studies have comprehensively discussed the film *Shoplifters* (Kore-eda) from various angles – ranging from social criticism and representation of the lower class by using Stuart Hall's theory and critical discourse analysis (Setyaningsih and Saraswati, 2022). Then, legal-social context and social context and the failure of intervention systems (Pang, and Kurokawa, 2020) or to its role in reflecting ideas of law, justice, and community through film form analysis (Vilaça, 2023). There are still methodological and theoretical gaps in analyzing the film's meaning construction. The recent research, which focuses on the Representation of Social Inequality through Roland Barthes' Semiotics framework, fills the gap by shifting from thematic or macro-context analysis to micro and structural analysis of specific signs in *mise-en-scene* elements, such as setting, costumes, and camera angles). By investigating Barthes' three levels of signification (denotation, connotation, and myth), your study will provide a deeper understanding of how the ideology of social inequality and the myth of the non-conventional family are explicitly and implicitly constructed and communicated through the visual and audiovisual language of film, a semiotic aspect that has not been discussed in depth by previous studies.

In semiotics, a sign consists of two main components: the signifier, which is the physical form or representation of the sign (such as a word or image), and the signified, which is the concept or meaning represented by the signifier (Barthes, 2017:61-68). Semiology, which is a branch of linguistics, began with the theories of Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce. Saussure viewed language as a structural sign system, while Peirce developed a broader theory of semiotics, including visual signs and the concept of the trichotomy of signs, namely icons, indexes, and symbols. After that, Roland Barthes developed the concept of two-level semiotics, namely denotation and connotation, and also introduced the theory of myth in culture.

Barthes' concept is known as the order of signification, which consists of primary signification or denotation (literal or dictionary meaning) and secondary signification or connotation (meaning formed through cultural and personal experience). Denotation refers to the literal meaning of a sign, while connotation includes a deeper meaning, often influenced by ideology or cultural values inherent in a society. Barthes (1977:10) sees that signs can function more than just conveying direct meaning; these signs can form a worldview that conveys certain ideas.

Barthes (1972:112), argues that there are three stages in semiotic analysis: denotation, connotation, and myth. Denotation is the first level, which is the literal or basic meaning of a sign. Connotation is the second level, which includes meanings constructed through culture and social associations. The third level is myth, which is the result of connotative meanings formed to convey a particular ideology or worldview. According to Barthes (1972:113), myths are in a sign system consisting of signifiers, signified, and signs that form new signs. Myth is a form of communication that plays a certain role. This means that the meaning of myth begins with connotative meaning which then develops into denotative meaning, creating a new understanding that is often in accordance with ideological views. Social inequality refers to the injustice in the distribution of wealth, resources, and opportunities within a society,

which creates striking differences between social groups. According to Badruzaman (2009:284), this inequality occurs when higher-status groups possess greater influence and power, and it can manifest in various forms such as economics, education, and health.

Factors such as social background, race, and gender reinforce social inequality, where lower classes typically lack important positions while upper classes dominate areas with higher incomes (Prasetya, 2023:93). This inequality not only affects individual well-being but also social stability and economic progress, especially due to the unequal access to education, employment, healthcare, and public services. An example is illustrated in the film *Shoplifters*, which reflects social conditions in Japan, where Roland Barthes semiotic analysis is applied to examine the symbolic representation of social inequality, poverty, and injustice in the film.

METHOD

This research uses a qualitative method with a descriptive approach to explore the representation of social inequality in the film *Shoplifters*. It aims to understand social phenomena by examining the perceptions, motivations, and actions of subjects through naturalistic observation and interpretation. The primary data was collected through direct observation of the film, while secondary data consisted of books, journals, academic articles, and online sources related to Roland Barthes semiotic theory and Pitirim Sorokin's theory of social inequality.

Observation was conducted by watching *Shoplifters* through the Prime Video streaming service. The researcher recorded scenes that depict aspects of social inequality, based on indicators from Sorokin's theory, such as economic disparity and social marginalization. These selected scenes contained strong visual and narrative elements and were analyzed using Barthes semiotic theory, focusing on the levels of denotation, connotation, and myth. Supporting documentation included notes, screenshots, dialogue, and relevant visual elements from the film to strengthen the analysis.

In addition to film observation, data collection involved a literature study by reviewing relevant theoretical references. The data analysis process included reducing and categorizing information, then synthesizing it to identify meaningful patterns. Scenes with the most representative symbols of social inequality were systematically presented and interpreted using the combined framework of semiotic analysis and social stratification theory to address the research objectives and formulate conclusions.

This research applies Roland Barthes theory of semiotics, which in semiotic studies, meaning is derived from the relationship between signs and how those signs are organized into codes. Roland Barthes theory of semiotics is used to analyze how signs in films generate meaning. According to Barthes, a sign is composed of two elements: the signifier, which refers to the physical form such as an image or sound, and the signified, which is the concept or meaning it represents. Barthes identifies three levels of meaning, this three-level model serves as the foundation for analyzing how *Shoplifters* represents social inequality through cinematic signs. These levels of meaning can be decoded in media texts:

1. The level of denotation refers to the literal, surface-level meaning that is directly observable in film elements, such as setting, character appearance, dialogue, and behavior.
2. The level of connotation involves cultural and emotional associations that emerge through technical codes such as camera angles, lighting, editing, sound, and *mise-en-scene*. These elements convey deeper meanings shaped by cultural context.

3. The level of myth or ideology reflects how connotative meanings support and represent dominant societal values such as class, capitalism, family structure, or morality. These ideological codes function to naturalize social norms.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal how the film *Shoplifters* visually and narratively presents various aspects of social inequality through the lens of semiotics. By analyzing selected scenes, the discussion uncovers how the cinematic elements communicate both explicit and implicit meanings related to poverty, marginalization, and the struggle for survival. This section explores how *mise-en-scene* components such as setting, costume, makeup, and camera work operate as signs that reflect the socioeconomic conditions experienced by the characters. Using Roland Barthes framework, each layer of meaning from denotation to connotation and myth is examined to understand how the film reviews societal norms and exposes structural disparities embedded in daily life.

Social Disparity in Family Relationships

Two scenes have strong potential to be analyzed on social disparity in family relationships in the film *Shoplifters*. Of the two, the dinner scene with the Shibata family is the main choice because it best represents how social disparity affects the form and meaning of the family itself. Instead of a biological family, they form an artificial family due to economic coercion, but it actually presents a warmth that is not always found in formal families.

The Shibata family has dinner together in a narrow space, sharing simple food. Although not blood related, they show the warmth of a family that is motivated by the struggle to live together. The scene has strong potential to be analyzed on social inequality in family relationships in the film *Shoplifters*. Of the two, the dinner scene with the Shibata family is the main choice because it best represents how social inequality affects the form and meaning of the family itself. Instead of a biological family, they form an artificial family due to economic coercion, but it presents a warmth that is not always found in formal families.



Figure 1 Scene Dinner
(Timecode: 00:18:17 - 00:20:34, Screenshot *Shoplifters* Film)

The denotation of Figure 1 shows the Shibata family sitting in a circle in a narrow dining room. Each family member seems to interact with each other, sharing simple food on a small table. The clothes they wear look simple and functional, while their faces are natural without makeup with an eye-level camera angle. The connotation that arises from the *mise-en-scene* element strengthens the image of the narrow space actually strengthening their relationship,

and the warmth of a family does not have to come from luxury. The narrow dining room is a symbol of economic limitations and privacy. The absence of luxurious clothes shows that they do not have access to appear flashy, and their dull faces also show that they do not care too much about their appearance. The eye-level camera angle shows an equal relationship between family members, without dominance or hierarchy, even though their backgrounds and roles are different.

The myth in this scene shows the main sign is their togetherness in a narrow dining room; the signifiers include the visuals of a narrow room, simple clothes, and faces without make-up; while the signified is a depiction of a warm but limited lower-class life. The connotation of these signs builds the myth that the warmth of a family does not always depend on blood ties or material luxury, but on solidarity and shared struggle. Despite living in limitations, their togetherness seems to be a substitute for material well-being. The narrow room illustrates the limitations as well as the closeness that arises from sharing space, simple clothes show that their identities are shaped by economic reality, not status. Natural make-up indicates a life that is more focused on survival. Meanwhile, the camera angle emphasizes that relationships in lower-class families are built on the basis of togetherness and mutual need.

The Shibata family dinner scene shows how social inequality reshapes the structure and meaning of family. In Pitirim Sorokin's theory of social inequality, the Shibata family's condition illustrates a group of people trapped in a zone of structural poverty, where vertical social mobility is difficult to achieve. They live in economic constraints that block access to social facilities, thus creating an alternative family based on needs and affection, not formal institutions. This shows that social inequality not only separates economic classes, but also reshapes the way individuals build family relationships in an unequal reality.

Social Disparity in Economy

There are 7 scenes in the movie *Shoplifters* that represent social disparity, especially in the economic aspect. The scene that best represents social disparity in economy is when Osamu continues to help Shota and Yuri steal in a shop even though he is injured. This scene reflects the severe economic pressure that not only creates poverty, but also forces families from the lower social class to take actions outside the norm as a form of struggle to survive in a system that is unequal and does not side with them.



Figure 2 Scene of Stealing in a Shop

(Timecode: 00:30:42 – 00:31:30,

Doc: Azalea Danuta Korpas, Screenshot of the film *Shoplifters*, November 12, 2024)

Osamu, who is injured, still accompanies Shota and Yuri to steal goods in a shop. Even though his condition does not allow him to move freely, Osamu still plays an active role in helping the two children, showing how desperate their family's economic situation is. This scene depicts a sharp contrast between Osamu's family life who live in poverty, with the reality of the upper class who can meet basic needs without difficulty. Theft in this scene not only reflects a criminal act, but is a symbol of coercion due to an unequal socio-economic system that does not provide fair space for those in the lower classes.

The denotation of this scene shows Shota and Yuri stealing in a small shop. The shop is neatly arranged with bright lighting, highlighting the various daily necessities available. The two children wear clothes that look too big and shabby, while their faces are dirty and their hair is messy, reflecting an unkempt living condition. The camera angle shows a low angle when Shota steals and eye level when Shota and Yuri run away.

The connotations that emerge from the *mise-en-scene* elements in this scene reinforce the idea of social boundaries that distinguish those who have and have not. The store setting symbolizes both hope and injustice, where basic necessities are in plain sight but cannot be obtained by the Osamu family without breaking the law. The shabby costumes represent the economic reality that makes them unable to afford decent clothing, while the dirty make-up reflects their physical condition as a reflection of the social and economic pressures they constantly face. The low angle on Shota reflects the great moral burden he bears when stealing, while the eye level as he escapes emphasizes their equality as individuals struggling to survive.

The myth in this scene reinforces the idea that social order is not neutral, but rather favors the upper class and limits the opportunities of the lower class. The signifiers are the visual appearance of Osamu, who is injured but still helps children steal, and the neat setting of the shop. The signifiers are the depiction of the struggle to survive amidst economic limitations and access to basic necessities. These signs form the myth that poverty is the result of systemic inequality, where individuals from the lower class are forced to break the law as a means of survival. The setting of the shop reinforces the myth that basic necessities are always available, but only to those with purchasing power. The costumes and make-up reinforce the myth that poverty is the result of structural economic inequality, where the lower class is marginalized from basic access to things like self-care. The low angle and eye level reflect social inequality, where children are forced to bear the moral burden of adults, but they are still ordinary people who are equal and want to survive.

This scene depicts the social gap in the economy as a situation that forces individuals to steal in order to survive. Visual signs such as shops full of goods and children stealing symbolize the limited access for the lower class. Inequality is clearly visible when basic necessities are available, but only for those who can afford it. This reflects that in an unequal social structure, poverty is not just an economic condition, but also the result of a system that fails to provide space for justice for all levels of society.

Social Disparities in the Environment

The Shibata family's living conditions are cramped, dark, and crowded. Their house looks shabby with rotten wooden walls and piled up belongings due to limited space. All family

members are crowded into one small room, reflecting the unsuitable conditions of the house for poor people.

The denotation in Figure 3 shows the Shibata family living in a cramped and cluttered house without adequate private space. The belongings are piled up in the corner of the room, indicating that they do not have enough space to store their daily necessities neatly. The cramped conditions of the house limit their movement, making daily activities feel more difficult and less comfortable. The Shibata family members wear simple and loose clothing. Their faces are without makeup with dull skin. The camera angle used is eye level. The connotation of the *mise-en-scene* element in this scene shows that the living conditions can reflect economic limitations that force poor families to live in less-than-ideal situations. The lack of privacy and limited space to move around are symbols of poverty that limits comfort and freedom in living daily life. The simplicity of the clothes worn illustrates financial limitations, where clothing is not a top priority compared to other more pressing needs. Meanwhile, the dull and unkempt faces reflect the pressures of life that they constantly face, where the struggle to survive overrides attention to self-care. The use of eye level creates a realistic and intimate impression, as if the audience is directly in the narrow space of the Shibata family.



Figure 3 Scene of the Shibata Family's Residence Conditions

(Timecode: 00:05:03, Doc: Azalea Danuta Korpas, Screenshot of the film Shoplifters, January 12, 2025)

The myth in this scene shows markers in the form of dim lighting, piles of goods, shabby clothes, and dull faces. The signifiers are a life full of limitations, economic pressure, and lack of attention to self-care. When these signifiers and signified are combined, signs are formed that lead to connotations of poverty and social marginalization. Shabby and simple clothes are considered signs of poverty, confirming the social view that those who are less fortunate live far from the standard of welfare. Likewise, an unkempt appearance, which is often associated with economic hardship, reinforces the stigma that poor people do not have access to adequate self-care. Eye level reinforces the myth that poor people are united with the harshness of the lives they lead by bringing the audience into a narrow living space. This scene shows how visual representation can create an unequal social structure. Inequality in access to housing reinforces social boundaries that separate groups of people based on economic level. Cramped and unhealthy housing not only affects the quality of physical life, but also creates a hierarchical social experience, where poor groups are often excluded from decent living spaces.

Social Inequality in Social Marginalization

The Shibata family who tries to avoid public attention and authorities. This is evident when they carefully avoid direct interaction with the wider community, fearing being caught when committing a theft, and finally when they are separated by the law after being caught.

This scene shows that their low economic status and morality make them isolated from society and always on guard.



Figure 4 Scene of the Shibata Family Captured
(Timecode: 01:31:00 – 01:31:41,

Doc: Azalea Danuta Korpas, Screenshot of the film *Shoplifters*, January 15, 2025)

The denotation in Figure 4 shows the Shibata family in front of their house at night. They look restless and ready to leave with bags containing their personal belongings. Their faces are covered in sweat. This scene uses an eye-level camera angle to show the Shibata family. The connotation of the *mise-en-scene* elements in this scene shows the Shibata family in a state of stress and fear. The dark and silent night atmosphere adds to the impression of their isolation, as if the world around them has closed off access to a better life. The makeshift clothes with bags containing belongings show their desperate state, depicting a life that is always moving without certainty. The sweaty faces symbolize the anxiety and tension they experience, reflecting the futile efforts to fight a system that is not on their side. The eye-level camera angle shows the equal position of the audience and the Shibata family, as if the audience is standing directly in front of them, witnessing the situation without distance or superiority.

The myth built from this scene reinforces stereotypes about marginalized groups that are often associated with crime and social instability. Signs in this scene include the dark and quiet night setting, minimal clothing with full luggage, sweaty faces, and the eye-level camera angle. The signifiers of these elements are visual depictions of urgency and pressure. The signifier is the meaning contained behind these elements, namely that marginalized groups like the Shibata family live in social and economic pressure that makes them look like criminals. The dark night depicts the gloom of their fate, as if they were destined to fail in a social system that does not give them opportunities. Minimal clothing and lots of luggage are often identified with runaways or homelessness, although in this case it reflects more of a compulsion due to difficult economic conditions. Sweaty faces can also be associated with guilt or an attempt to escape from crime, although in reality, the Shibata family is only trying to survive in a system that is not on their side. The eye-level camera angle depicts the Shibata family's position as equal to other humans, but they live in structural inequality without proper access to education, work, or social security.

This scene shows how visual symbols such as the dark night, modest clothing, sweaty faces, and parallel camera angles form the image of the Shibata family as a marginalized group. These elements not only show their condition, but also show that they are outside the

just social system. They are not only economically poor, but also socially excluded. In a social structure that is divided into layers, people like the Shibata family often do not have the opportunity to rise to a higher position as Sorokin's mobility theory. This scene shows that marginalization is the result of inequality that continues to be maintained by the social system.

CONCLUSION

Based on the research conducted in the previous chapter, it can be concluded that there are four aspects of social inequality shown in several scenes in the film *Shoplifters*, namely social disparities in the family, economy, environment and social marginalization. The scenes depicting this social inequality are then analyzed using the concept of two orders of signification in Roland Barthes' semiotics, which describes meaning through denotation, connotation, and myth. This analysis is carried out by observing the elements of *mise-en-scene*, including settings, costumes, make-up, and camera angles that strengthen the narrative about social inequality.

The Shibata family's life in this film is shown at the denotative level as a harmonious and happy family, but has very limited conditions, ranging from cramped and shabby housing, simple clothing, to the necessities of life that must be met by stealing. The connotative meaning in the film actually shows how poverty is not only limited to the economic aspect, but also affects social aspects, such as education and morality. The Shibata family is depicted as a group that is marginalized from the wider social system, where they do not have access to formal education, health, decent work, and equal social justice. The meaning of the film's myth is that poverty is often constructed as a result of the inability of individuals to achieve prosperity, when in reality, structural and systemic factors contribute to exacerbating social inequality. The film *Shoplifters* shows that poor groups are often trapped in a cycle of poverty that is difficult to break through, where they have to face discrimination, stereotypes, and limited opportunities to improve their standard of living.

The film *Shoplifters* represents social inequality by showing the reality of lower-class society in detail. The *mise-en-scene* elements in various scenes not only function as visual aspects, but also become the main means of conveying social inequality. The analysis conducted shows that social inequality is not just an economic issue, but is also rooted in a social system that does not provide equal access for every individual. The representation shown in this film shows how the social and economic conditions of marginalized groups are influenced by structural factors, so that the inequality that occurs is not just a result of individual conditions, but part of a more complex problem. Hirokazu Kore-eda in *Shoplifters* conveys that the meaning of family is not always born from blood relations, but from togetherness, care, and the choice to look after each other. Through a narrative about a fake family that loves each other despite being in poverty and marginalized, Kore-eda emphasizes the myth that social inequality can be overcome emotionally through the warmth and solidarity that grows from artificial family relationships, which actually feel more sincere than biological families that are sometimes full of violence or neglect.

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