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## Representation of Feminism in The Film Lucy Through Roland Barthes' Semiotic Analysis

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Claudia Yossi Grace Marpaung<sup>1</sup>, Eko Heriyanto<sup>2</sup>, Nenin Astiti Ayunda<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1,2,3</sup>Study Program English Literature, Faculty of Language & Culture, UNAKI

Email: <sup>1</sup>[claudiayossigrace@gmail.com](mailto:claudiayossigrace@gmail.com) <sup>2</sup>[eko.heriyanto@unaki.ac.id](mailto:eko.heriyanto@unaki.ac.id) <sup>3</sup>[nenin.astiti@unaki.ac.id](mailto:nenin.astiti@unaki.ac.id)

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### Abstract

This study examines the representation of feminism in the film Lucy (2014) through Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis. This research employs a qualitative descriptive approach using Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis, which explores denotation, connotation, and myth. By analyzing the signs and symbols present in the film, the research aims to uncover the underlying meanings and messages regarding feminism. The data in this research will be collected using documentation techniques and literature studies. The results of this research show that there are multiple signs of feminism that are shown through this film, such as women's autonomy being undermined and their consent not being respected, women are often viewed solely as objects of desire and subjected to physical aggression. However, Lucy showed that women had the capacity to assert themselves and change their circumstances, women had the capability to confront challenges and overcome obstacles, and women could take bold steps and contribute actively to their outcomes.

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*Keywords: Feminism, Film, Semiotics*

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### Introduction

For years, societal expectations have shaped the gender roles of women and men, dictating how they should behave and conform to specific norms based on their gender. Women often face numerous challenges in society due to stereotypes and unrealistic beauty standards imposed upon them (Malau, Kusumayanti, & Supiastutik, 2024). Over time, societal norms have defined specific roles and expectations for men and women, which have become deeply ingrained practices that contribute to unequal treatment based on gender (Yusrina, 2022).

In the modern era, there is a growing focus on how women are portrayed in mass media. Given that numerous women continue to encounter discrimination in their everyday lives, movies often explore the concept of

gender equality (Myisha et al., 2023, p. 72). Films have become influential tools in shaping societal views, serving as effective means of communication to audiences gathered in one place (Effendy, 1929, p. 226). Thus, exploring the representation of women in film not only unveils intricate layers of cultural meaning and significance but also underscores the pivotal role that cinematic portrayals play in shaping contemporary discourses on gender equality and empowerment.

Representation plays a vital role in cultural studies, acting as a bridge between individuals and their surrounding environment. It enables us to discern how the world is portrayed across diverse contexts, such as politics, economics, social dynamics, culture, and ideologies. Whether conveyed through visual imagery, written text, real-life



occurrences, or audio-visual media, representation involves the process of presenting or portraying something. It constitutes a fundamental element of communication, facilitating the exchange of messages through various media channels to construct meaning (Alamsyah, 2020, p. 93). Representation links the ideas in one's mind to interpret both real (actual objects, people, events) and fictional (imaginary objects, people, beings, events) aspects of the world (Hall, 1997).

The content of a film not only mirrors reality but also constructs it. Media reality often involves specific symbols or signs that are present within the content of mass media products. Thus, it can be inferred that media reality comprises the symbols found within the content of a media product (Bungin, 2007). Beyond mere portrayal, films advocating for feminist values can serve as a catalyst to inspire conscious efforts from both men and women toward effecting change. Through compelling storytelling and conveyed messages, these films urge audiences to challenge prevailing gender norms and advocate for equality. Feminist literary criticism is an approach within literary studies that uses feminist perspectives to analyze literary texts (Barry, 2002).

Feminism entails an awareness of the oppression and exploitation of women in various spheres, including within families, workplaces, and societies, as well as the deliberate actions of both men and women to linguistically alter these conditions (Sa'idah & Khatimah, 2003, p. 34). It involves conscious efforts from both women and men to change these conditions, create harmonious relationships between them, and eliminate all forms of subordination, marginalization, and discrimination (Mustaqim, 2008). *Lucy* (2014) is among the

films that incorporate feminist representations.

*Lucy* (2014) is a film starring Scarlett Johansson, falling under the genres of action and sci-fi. The movie revolves around the protagonist, Lucy, a woman who accidentally gets caught up in a shady deal that turns the tables on her captors, transforming her into a relentless fighter.

The research problem in this study is “How is the denotative meaning depicted in the signs representing feminism in the film *Lucy*?”, “What is the connotative meaning in the signs that depict feminism in the film *Lucy*?”, “How can the myth representing feminism in the film *Lucy* be analyzed?” This study aims to uncover the underlying symbols and meanings within the film that pertain to feminist themes and messages. By employing Barthes' theories on denotation, connotation, and myth, the research will explore how the film constructs and conveys feminist narratives through its characters.

There is a previous study that serves as a reference for this research. One of them is “The Representation of *Lucy* as Tough Woman In Luc Besson's *Lucy* (2014)” by Maharani Kartika Rahmi (2017). The research examined the representation of tough woman using Louis Giannetti's narrative non-narrative approach in conjunction with Jeffrey Brown's theory. The study concluded that the feminist movement is portrayed as unsuccessful in this movie because it still presents females as weak beings. The research highlighted that even in contemporary cinema, women are depicted as reliant on men.

Another previous study is titled “The Analysis of Conflict in the Movie *LUCY*” by Ni Luh Made Eva Lusiana (2017). The research examined the conflict faced by the main character using a qualitative approach



with the conflict theory of literature by William Kenney and the theory of managing interpersonal communication by Deetz & Stevenson. The study concluded that there is external conflict and internal conflict in this film.

The first previous study shares a similar focus of discussion, albeit with different approaches and theories, but centered around the same object of study. The second previous study shares a different focus of discussion and theory but uses the same approach and object of study.

### Research Method

This research employs a qualitative descriptive approach using Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis, which explores denotation, connotation, and myth. Descriptive research is a method for investigating the current state of a group of people, specific subjects, conditions, systems of thought, or a series of events. The goal of this descriptive research is to produce a systematic description or depiction of the phenomena under investigation and the relationships among them (Nazir, 2011, p. 54). Qualitative research is a research method aimed at producing findings that cannot be achieved through statistical procedures or other quantitative approaches (Murdiyanto, 2020, p. 19).

Roland Barthes viewed social life, regardless of its form, as a unique system of signs (Kurniawan, 2001). The signs referred to represent an attempt to comprehend aspects of life (Sinuraya, 2021). Roland Barthes' Semiotic Theory highlights three primary aspects in his analysis: denotative meaning, connotative meaning, and myth, which form the essence of his thinking (Octaviani, 2021, p. 3). Denotation refers to the true (explicit) meaning that is socially agreed upon and refers to reality. Connotation carries implicit

meanings, implying that these meanings can accept new interpretations. Barthes connects connotation with ideology, which he refers to as "myths." According to Barthes' viewpoint, myths are the continued result of connotation, forming a web of meanings that have existed previously (Vera, 2014, p. 28).

Roland Barthes has a different perspective on myths compared to the conventional understanding. Generally, myths are viewed as superstitions or irrational beliefs (Hasibuan, 2013, p. 5). Barthes argues that myths are a form of discourse that can manifest in both visual imagery and written text, imbued with significance (Barthes, 1957, p. 108).

The primary data source used in this research is the film *Lucy*, consisting of specific scenes that represent the feminism of the main character. Primary data is a data source that directly provides data to data collectors (Sugiyono, 2012). The secondary data sources for this research are obtained from documents, literature, books, journals, or other studies related to this research. Their function is to provide additional information that supports and complements the primary data (Saifuddin, 2023, p. 37). *Lucy* is accessible for viewing on the "Vidio" platform, providing an opportunity to closely examine the film and its portrayal of gender dynamics. Through this analysis, the study seeks to contribute to the broader conversation on feminism in contemporary cinema.

The data in this research will be collected using documentation techniques and literature studies. Documentation is a data collection technique involving screenshots of scenes that are useful for providing comprehensive information to support the research process (Saifuddin, 2023, p. 39). Literature study is a method for gathering information through various sources



available in libraries or other sources, such as books, newspapers, magazines, manuscripts, documentation, and other materials related to the research (Guntoro, 2021, p. 33).

## Findings and Discussion

The portrayal of feminism in the film *Lucy* (2014) is evident in several scenes. The feminist principles depicted in *Lucy* (2014) are showcased through particular scenes that have been captured in screenshots. The following scenes will be described using Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis, which illustrates denotation, connotation, and myth.

### *Feminism in the First Scene*



Picture 1. *Lucy* (2014) sign 1

Denotation:

In this scene, Richard, Lucy's boyfriend, requests Lucy to deliver a suitcase. Despite Lucy's clear refusal, Richard compels her by handcuffing her hands together along with the suitcase.

Connotation:

Richard's request for Lucy to deliver a suspicious suitcase, despite her refusal, implies manipulation and disregard for Lucy's autonomy. By handcuffing Lucy's hands together with the suitcase, Richard uses physical force to coerce Lucy into complying with his demands, highlighting a coercive and oppressive dynamic in their relationship. This portrayal underscores broader themes related to gender dynamics and the abuse of power, reflecting deeper societal issues regarding consent, agency, and control.

Myth:

Richard's manipulation of Lucy and disregard for her autonomy represent a myth that perpetuates the idea that women's choices and desires are subordinate to male authority. It perpetuates the belief that women's consent and autonomy can be disregarded, reflecting deeper societal issues surrounding consent, agency, and power imbalances. This portrayal in *Lucy* highlights the urgent need to challenge and dismantle such myths, advocating for gender equality and the empowerment of women to make their own choices free from coercion and oppression.

### *Feminism in Scene Two*





**Picture 2. Lucy (2014) sign 2**

**Denotation:**

In this particular scene, a guard tries to sexually assault Lucy. Lucy expresses her refusal by saying “I’m not in the mood” and pushes away the guard's hands. Following this, the guard proceeds to physically assault Lucy by slapping her until she lies sprawled on the ground then kicking her in the stomach.

**Connotation:**

Lucy's clear refusal to the guard's sexual advances reflects her agency and assertion of boundaries, embodying feminist principles of autonomy and consent. However, the subsequent physical assault on Lucy emphasizes the brutal consequences of patriarchal dominance. Lucy's resistance symbolizes the ongoing struggle against sexual harassment and assault, showcasing the courage and resilience required to confront inequalities.

**Myth:**

Her refusal and subsequent assault highlight the challenges women face in asserting their autonomy and confronting patriarchal power dynamics. Lucy's experience underscores the pervasive nature of gender-based violence and the need for continued efforts to challenge and dismantle oppressive systems. Her resistance represents a broader narrative of feminist struggle, emphasizing the importance of empowerment, autonomy, and the fight for gender equality.

**Feminism in Scene Three**



**Picture 3. Lucy (2014) sign 3**

**Denotation:**



When Lucy was held captive, another guard entered her room with the intention to rape her. However, Lucy fought back and overpowered him.

**Connotation:**

Lucy's defiance and ability to overpower the guard challenge traditional gender roles that portray women as passive victims. By resisting the guard's attempt to rape her, Lucy exemplifies agency and strength, reclaiming control over her body and autonomy. Lucy's actions represent a broader narrative of women's empowerment, highlighting the importance of asserting boundaries and challenging predatory behavior. The scene challenges societal norms that perpetuate victim-blaming and victimization of women, advocating for a culture of accountability and respect.

**Myth:**

Historically, women have often been portrayed as passive victims in narratives of sexual violence, reinforcing the notion that they are inherently vulnerable and powerless in such situations. This myth perpetuates the belief that women's agency and autonomy are limited and that resistance against aggression is uncommon or unrealistic. Lucy's defiance and ability to overpower the guard showcase a different narrative of female empowerment. Her actions symbolize the strength and agency of women, challenging the idea that women must passively accept victimization. By resisting and defeating the assailant, Lucy reclaims control over her body and autonomy, highlighting the importance of asserting boundaries and standing up against predatory behavior.

This scene challenges societal norms that perpetuate victim-blaming and the normalization of sexual violence, advocating for a culture of accountability and respect. It promotes the notion that women can and

should assert themselves in the face of violence, reshaping narratives around gender and empowerment. Ultimately, this myth challenges us to reconsider ingrained stereotypes and biases, fostering a more equitable and just society where women are recognized as agents of change and strength.

**Feminism in Scene Four**



**Picture 4. Lucy (2014) sign 4**

**Denotation:**

Lucy escaped from the room where she was held captive and then proceeded to shoot the guards who had confined her.

**Connotation:**

The connotation of this scene symbolizes liberation and defiance against oppression.



Lucy's escape from captivity represents a break from confinement and control, signifying freedom and empowerment. By taking action against her captors and shooting the guards, Lucy embodies resistance and courage, reclaiming her agency and autonomy. This connotation challenges narratives of victimization and passivity, emphasizing the strength and determination required to challenge injustice.

#### Myth:

The myth embedded within this scene challenges conventional power dynamics and societal expectations. Lucy's escape and retaliation disrupt the myth of helplessness and subjugation often associated with women in captivity. Instead of succumbing to her circumstances, Lucy becomes an agent of change, challenging the notion that women are passive victims.

#### *Feminism in Scene Five*



**Picture 5. Lucy (2014) sign 5**

#### Denotation:

Professor Samuel Norman asked Lucy, "Are you sure you need a large dose? I'm afraid you won't survive." Lucy replied that the cells in her body would fight, and she had to push them to reach the last few percent.

#### Connotation:

Professor Samuel Norman's concern about Lucy's survival implies potential risks associated with pushing her body to its limits. Lucy will sacrifice herself by injecting a large dose of CPH4 to unlock 100% of her brain's capacity and provide the information and knowledge she gains naturally to Professor Samuel Norman.

#### Myth:

Lucy's decision to sacrifice herself by injecting a large dose of CPH4 to unlock her brain's full potential challenges this myth. Her willingness to take risks and push herself beyond conventional limits subverts the idea that women should be passive. By seeking to unlock her brain's capacity and share her knowledge with Professor Norman, Lucy exemplifies agency and autonomy, defying the myth that women are solely caretakers. Lucy's actions symbolize the rejection of societal constraints and the pursuit of self-actualization, emphasizing the importance of challenging traditional gender roles and embracing the full spectrum of human potential regardless of gender.



In analyzing the film "Lucy" (2014) through the lens of Roland Barthes' theory of semiotics, we can explore the concepts of denotation, connotation, and myth to unpack the film's representations and underlying messages.

Firstly, denotation refers to the literal or surface-level meaning of signs within the film. In "Lucy," denotation can be observed in specific scenes where the protagonist, played by Scarlett Johansson, gains enhanced cognitive abilities after ingesting a synthetic drug. This transformation of her physical and mental capacities is explicitly depicted and serves as the primary narrative element driving the plot forward.

Moving on to connotation, Barthes' theory invites us to consider the symbolic or associative meanings of these signs. In "Lucy," the connotations of the protagonist's transformation extend beyond the literal events portrayed on screen. The heightened abilities of the character can be interpreted as a metaphor for empowerment, liberation, and the transcendence of human limitations. This connotative layer invites viewers to reflect on broader themes related to identity, agency, and the nature of existence.

Lastly, Barthes' concept of myth is particularly illuminating when applied to "Lucy". Myth, according to Barthes, involves the naturalization of cultural values or ideologies through symbolic representations. In the context of the film, the myth emerges around the notion of human potential and the limitations imposed by societal norms. The narrative constructs a myth of female empowerment, challenging conventional gender roles and presenting the protagonist as a figure who transcends biological constraints. This mythologization reinforces broader cultural ideals related to

individuality, self-actualization, and the pursuit of knowledge.

## Conclusion

Based on the discussed findings, it can be concluded that the research on the representation of feminism in the film "Lucy" (2014) using Roland Barthes' semiotic theory encapsulates numerous feminist values. In depicting feminist representation, the film "Lucy" (2014) employs various signs aimed at elucidating the conditions of that time.

The denotative meaning in this film is that Lucy is a woman whose boyfriend forces her to deliver a suitcase, then she becomes a drug courier. Lucy was locked in a room in the process but then managed to get out of it and kill the mafia that locked her. She then injects herself with a large dose of CPH4.

The connotative meaning in this film is Lucy was framed by her boyfriend for his gain, then she was kidnapped, someone tried to raped her in the process and forced to transport drugs by mafia. Lucy escapes from the room where she was held captive and shoots all the guards who confined her. She then sacrifice herself to share extraordinary knowledge with others.

The myth concluded in this film is indicating that a woman's consent is often disregarded, women are often viewed as mere objects of desire, but women can also fight back and change their circumstances, women can possess strong determination and defeat their adversaries alone, and women also dare to take risks, and not always should women be seen as individuals who need protection.

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