

Representation of Moral Messages in the Film *High & Low The Movie 3: Final Mission* (Roland Barthes' Semiotic Analysis)

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ABSTRACT

The film industry today is not limited to entertainment alone but also plays an important role as a medium for delivering moral messages to society. One international film that strongly represents moral values is *High & Low The Movie 3: Final Mission*. The urgency of this study lies in the lack of research employing Roland Barthes' semiotics to analyze moral messages in *High & Low The Movie 3: Final Mission*. This study aims to analyze how moral messages are represented in the film, focusing on how these meanings are constructed and conveyed through narrative and visual elements. The research was conducted using a qualitative descriptive method by applying Roland Barthes' semiotic approach, which includes three stages of analysis: denotation, connotation, and myth. Data were collected through observation of significant scenes in the film as well as documentation from various supporting literature. The findings reveal that *High & Low The Movie 3: Final Mission* represents moral messages through the values of solidarity, courage, and sacrifice demonstrated in the actions of the main characters. The film deconstructs dominant myths related to power, development, and individual heroism, while constructing a new narrative about the collective strength of society in resisting injustice. The conclusion of this study affirms that films can serve as an effective medium in delivering moral values and shaping social awareness. Future research is recommended to explore the representation of moral messages in other film genres or in digital-based visual media.

INTRODUCTION

The journey of the Indonesian film industry has gone through various dynamics from the colonial era to the present day. In the early 20th century, European films were introduced by the Dutch colonizers as a form of entertainment for the colonial society. After Indonesia gained independence, the local film industry began to develop with an increase in film production. However, in the 1990s, Indonesian cinema experienced a significant decline due to various challenges. A revival occurred in the early 2000s, marked by the growth in film production, improved quality, and a rising number of audiences. This indicates that films in Indonesia not only serve as a medium of entertainment but also function as a tool for conveying relevant social and cultural messages [1].

One social phenomenon relevant to the narrative of *High & Low The Movie 3: Final Mission* is kodokushi, or dying in solitude. Kodokushi refers to a condition in which a person, particularly the elderly, passes away without anyone noticing for a considerable

period of time. This phenomenon has become increasingly prevalent in Japan, along with the rising number of elderly people living alone and the weakening of social bonds and the nuclear family. A study by Putri Elsy, Wirawan, and Saptandari (2024) reveals that kodokushi is a consequence of the *Juggernaut of Modernity* as described by Anthony Giddens—rapid, massive, and uncontrollable social change. The main causes of this phenomenon include the rise of individualistic lifestyles, the culture of *meiwaku o kakenai* (a reluctance to trouble others), and the transformation of family structures from extended families to nuclear families. This study emphasizes that kodokushi is not merely a personal issue but also a social phenomenon that reflects the challenges of modern Japanese society in maintaining social solidarity amid the strong currents of modernization [2].

In addition, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the phenomenon of kodokushi gained increased academic attention due to the rise in cases of social isolation among the elderly. Putri Elsy, Wirawan, and Saptandari (2024), in their study published in *Mozaik Humaniora*, explain that kodokushi is a consequence of the *Juggernaut of Modernity* as described by Anthony Giddens, in which rapid modernization and urbanization have weakened social bonds and reduced interpersonal interactions. The COVID-19 pandemic worsened this condition, as social restrictions further isolated the elderly, while limited digital access hindered them from staying connected with family or communities. The study emphasizes that the weakness of Japan's social support system is a key factor increasing the risk of kodokushi. Thus, this issue is no longer merely an individual matter but a social problem that requires collective intervention from the government, society, and social institutions [2].

The phenomenon of kodokushi reflects the weakness of social solidarity and the lack of collective responsibility in modern society. In the context of *High & Low The Movie 3: Final Mission*, central themes such as individual sacrifice, courage in confronting injustice, and group solidarity are closely related to this social issue. Through Roland Barthes' semiotic approach, the film can be read as a critique of the decline of collective values and as an emphasis on the importance of rebuilding social solidarity to prevent alienation and moral decay. The moral messages represented in the film function not only as entertainment but also as a reflection of real social phenomena currently occurring in Japan.

In media and cultural studies, the concept of representation is crucial in shaping social meaning through symbols and visually constructed narratives. Rio Febriannur Rachman (2020) explains that representation is the process of conveying ideas, values, and ideologies through visual and narrative constructions in film. He emphasizes how film is used as a medium for delivering messages, with visual analysis, discourse analysis, and content analysis as the primary methods for understanding the construction of meaning [3]. Selain itu, dalam kajian representasi nilai sosial budaya pada film pendek *Pamean*, Merlin Furthermore, in a study on the representation of socio-cultural values in the short film *Pamean*, Merlin Yupitasari (2024) demonstrates how visual symbols, language, and narratives are used to represent social realities—such as livelihood systems, forms of greeting, technological advancement, and the spirit of mutual cooperation within society. This study applies Peirce's semiotic approach to decompose signs into icons, indexes, and symbols [4].

Moral messages are ethical values, teachings, or social norms conveyed through media, either explicitly through dialogue or implicitly through characters' actions, plotlines, or visual symbols. These messages aim to provide life lessons, shape attitudes, and strengthen the audience's awareness of goodness and values in social life. In the context of character education, Tsoraya et al. (2023) emphasize that character education is highly

necessary in the digital era to shape a moral generation that fosters a sense of responsibility including in the use of technology as well as spiritual and ethical aspects as the foundation of social interaction within society [5]. Additionally, Pebriani et al. (2023) highlight the internalization of ethical values in social media from the perspective of Islamic Religious Education. They reveal that teachers play a crucial role in instilling honesty, courtesy, and responsibility when students engage with digital media, so that the process of ethical representation occurs not only cognitively but also in the formation of concrete attitudes [6].

One of the best films from Japan, *High & Low The Movie 3: Final Mission*, is an action film released in 2017 as part of the *High & Low* franchise. The film continues the story of the conflict between the SWORD gang and the yakuza organization Kuryu Group, focusing on SWORD's efforts to stop the Kuryu Group's plan to destroy their district in order to cover up a corruption scandal and build a casino. This film reflects the development of the Japanese film industry, which increasingly highlights complex narratives, profound characters, as well as intense action scenes and engaging fight choreography. Values such as friendship, courage, and justice serve as the core of the story presented [7].

This film centers on the struggles of the main characters and the members of the SWORD gang as they face various challenges that test their sense of justice and morality. It raises a major theme of the conflict between good and evil, where the characters are confronted with difficult choices that challenge their courage and integrity. In addition to offering spectacular action, the film also conveys a profound moral message about the importance of sacrifice and bravery in fighting against injustice. With its complex characters and suspenseful storyline, the film successfully captivates audiences while encouraging reflection on the values it portrays [8]. The film reached the top position at the Japanese box office during its opening week.



Figure 1. Official poster of the film *High & Low The Movie 3: Final Mission*
Source: Official Instagram account @high_low_official

The representation of moral messages in this film refers to how ethical values and life lessons are conveyed through narrative, characters, and visualization. Moral messages can be delivered explicitly through dialogue or implicitly through actions and story development. In *High & Low The Movie 3: Final Mission*, the moral messages conveyed include the importance of solidarity in facing injustice, the courage to resist corruption, and the power of friendship. The characters in the film demonstrate dedication to protecting their community, even when faced with great risks, reflecting the values of courage and sacrifice [9], [10].

As a medium of mass communication, film holds great potential to convey moral messages that can influence people's behavior and perspectives. One film that is relevant to be analyzed in this context is *High & Low The Movie 3: Final Mission*. This film not only offers entertainment but also serves as a vehicle for delivering moral messages that can be understood through a semiotic approach, particularly Roland Barthes' theory. In today's social conditions, where moral principles are often questioned or disregarded, it is important to examine how film can function as a means of character education and in shaping the behavior of its audience [11].

The semiotic approach proposed by Roland Barthes provides an analytical tool that enables a deeper understanding of the meanings contained within a film. Through three stages of analysis denotation, connotation, and myth the researcher can uncover how moral messages are designed to be conveyed to the audience and how the audience interprets them[11]. Previous studies using the semiotic approach have shown that analyzing the representation of moral messages in films can shape profound experiences regarding the social values upheld by society[12]. However, semiotic analysis of this particular film remains limited, and thus this study is expected to fill that gap.

This study offers significant novelty compared to previous research. The study by Natalia et al. (2024) [13]. Employed Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic approach to examine moral messages in *My Annoying Brother*. In contrast, this research adopts Roland Barthes' semiotic approach, placing greater emphasis on the analysis of denotative, connotative, and mythical meanings. Meanwhile, studies conducted by Arista et al. (2022) and Larasati et al [14], [11]. also applied Barthes' approach but focused on local films such as *Unbaedah* and *Lamun Sumelang*. This study differs in that it examines a renowned film from Japan, *High & Low The Movie 3: Final Mission*, which carries higher complexity in terms of culture, narrative, and visual elements. Thus, this research enriches the literature on film semiotics by exploring the representation of moral messages within the context of diverse global cultures.

This research takes into account a number of previous studies relevant to supporting the analysis of the representation of moral messages in film. The study conducted by Natalia and Ratriandita (2024) examined the film *My Annoying Brother* as the research object and applied Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic approach to analyze the representation of moral messages contained within its narrative and characters [15]. Although the topic and approach differ, that study shares similarities with this research in its focus on the representation of moral values in the medium of film. The difference lies in the theoretical framework used, as their study did not employ Roland Barthes' approach, and the film analyzed was a South Korean production that tends to emphasize the emotional dynamics of family.

Meanwhile, the study by Arista and Sudarmillah (2022) examined moral messages in the local film *Unbaedah* by Iqbaal Arieffurahman. This research applied Roland Barthes' semiotic approach to identify the structure of meaning in the film, focusing on local social and cultural values [16]. The similarity with this study lies in the use of Barthesian analysis to uncover layers of meaning in moral messages. However, their research object was rooted in an Indonesian local film that reflects a domestic social context, whereas this study analyzes a Japanese film, *High & Low The Movie 3: Final Mission*, which is rich in Japanese cultural values such as group loyalty, collective spirit, and sacrifice as integral parts of its narrative of action and resistance against injustice.

Another study by Larasati and Indriyani (2022) examined the representation of moral messages in the short film *Lamun Sumelang*, also using Roland Barthes' semiotic approach. Their research dissected the moral messages represented through visual symbolism and the short narrative structure [17]. The similarity between their study and this research lies in the use of Barthes' analytical framework and the focus on moral representation. However, a significant difference lies in the duration and cultural context of the films analyzed. *Lamun Sumelang*, as a local short film, represents the distinctive social values of Indonesian society, whereas the object of this study is a Japanese action film that not only conveys universal moral values but also reflects the complexities of modern Japanese culture, intertwined with cinematic myths and distinctive elements of the yakuza world and gang dynamics.

From this comparison, the novelty of this research lies in selecting the Japanese film *High & Low The Movie 3: Final Mission* as the object of a Roland Barthes semiotic study in the context of moral messages. This film not only offers engaging action visualization but also presents complex social dynamics, ranging from resistance against corruption, group solidarity, to individual sacrifice for the greater good. The moral values contained in the film are examined in depth through Barthes' three levels of meaning denotative, connotative, and mythical. Based on this background, the purpose of this research is to analyze how the representation of moral messages is constructed in *High & Low The Movie 3: Final Mission* using Roland Barthes' semiotic approach. The study focuses on how messages such as solidarity, sacrifice, and courage are communicated through narrative and visual elements, as well as how these meanings are interpreted ideologically within the context of contemporary Japanese culture.

Theoretically, this research contributes to the development of film semiotics studies by expanding the application of Roland Barthes' theory in the context of non-local cinema, which is rich in cultural symbolism and complex narratives. This study also enriches the discourse on film as a medium of moral communication, particularly within the realm of Japanese popular culture, which is relatively underexplored in Indonesian academic contexts. Practically, this research provides benefits for filmmakers, educators, and scholars of visual culture. For filmmakers, the findings can serve as a reference in designing strong and meaningful moral messages in audio-visual works. For educators, this film can be used as learning material to instill character values through popular media. Meanwhile, for researchers and students, this study opens further avenues for exploring the representation of moral values in cross-cultural visual media through a deep and reflective qualitative approach.

RESEARCH METHOD

The approach underlying this study is qualitative descriptive research, aimed at examining in depth the representation of moral messages in this film through Roland Barthes' semiotics. This method is naturalistic, in which the researcher seeks to understand phenomena in their original context [18]. Data were collected through observation and documentation. Observation was carried out by examining scenes involving character interactions, symbols, and dialogues that contained moral messages, while documentation was used to obtain data from relevant journals and literature [19]. This study applied purposive sampling, selecting scenes most relevant to the research objectives. Primary data were obtained from direct observation of the film, while secondary data were drawn from various references supporting the analysis [20].

The analysis was conducted using Roland Barthes' semiotic concept, which consists of three levels: denotation, connotation, and myth. Denotation refers to the literal meaning of signs, connotation describes broader meanings related to social and cultural values, while myth reflects the complex meanings formed from the interaction of the two [18]. The analytical process included reviewing the film, selecting scenes, and interpreting symbols, gestures, and visual elements to uncover moral messages [21]. To enhance data validity, source triangulation was applied by comparing various references [22].

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The representation of moral messages in film refers to the way ethical norms, social values, and life lessons are conveyed through narrative, characters, and visual elements. The representation of moral values is analyzed from a number of scenes containing moral messages, with a focus on how these messages are realized or presented in each scene [23]. Moral messages may be delivered explicitly through dialogue or implicitly through character actions and symbolism within the story. In Roland Barthes' semiotic study, the representation of moral messages is analyzed through three layers of meaning: denotation, connotation, and myth, which help uncover the hidden meanings behind the film's elements [24].

The life lessons that can be drawn from this film include values such as solidarity and unity. The film portrays how the gangs in the SWORD district come together to fight against the corrupt Kuryu Group. This solidarity is reflected in scenes where they set aside their differences for a common goal.

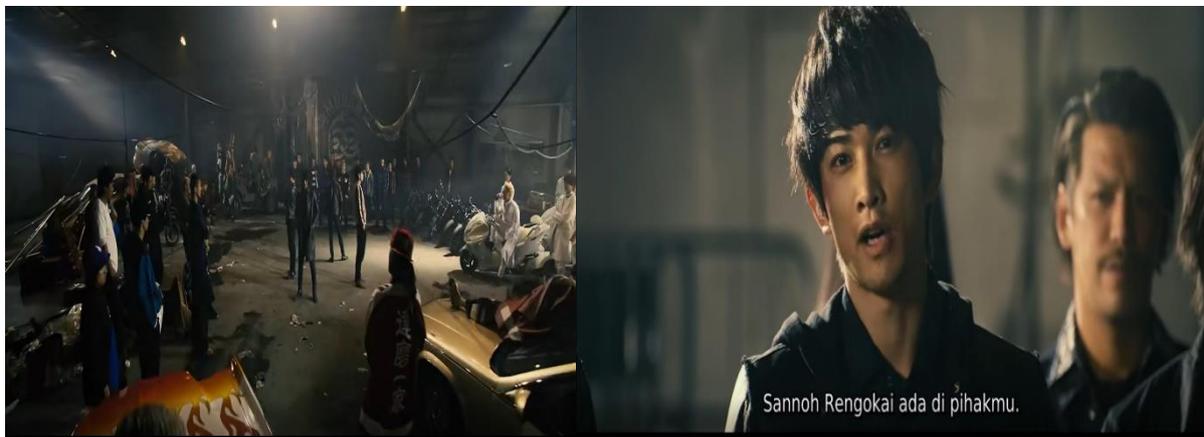


Figure 2. Several gangs unite against the crimes of the Kuryu Group
Source: Film streaming website Blibli.TV

At minute 1:04:50 in the film, there is a climactic scene that highlights a pivotal moment of unity among the SWORD district gangs. This scene shows all the major groups Sannoh Rengokai, White Rascals, Rude Boys, Daruma Ikka, and Oya Koukou gathering to devise a joint strategy against the threat posed by the Kuryu Group. In the midst of the tense situation, one member of Sannoh Rengokai firmly declares, "*Sannoh Rengokai is on your side.*"

Denotatively, this statement conveys the explicit support of Sannoh Rengokai for the other groups. It demonstrates a unified stance, even though they previously had conflicting backgrounds and distinct group identities. This declaration reflects that, when facing a greater threat, a sense of solidarity can unite groups that were once divided.

However, through Roland Barthes' semiotic approach, the statement carries a deeper connotative meaning. The seemingly simple sentence symbolizes solidarity, trust, and a sense of collective responsibility. In the context of popular culture, where street gangs are often portrayed as symbols of chaos and anarchy, this film instead presents a counter-narrative. The expressed support is not merely a strategic alliance, but also an embodiment of moral values and social ethics that emphasize the importance of collaboration. [25].

At the myth level, the dialogue "*Sannoh Rengokai is on your side*" in *High & Low The Movie 3: Final Mission* evokes a symbolic alignment with justice and reinforces the ideological narrative of collective solidarity against systemic injustice. Beyond affirming the alliance among gangs, the dialogue embodies noble Japanese cultural values such as the principles of Bushidō: loyalty (*chūgi*) and honor (*meiyo*), reflected in the characters' readiness to unite in defending their community and transforming the image of gangs from symbols of chaos into moral and responsible entities. According to Bambang Wibawarta's study (2006) in *Wacana* journal, the values of Bushidō loyalty, discipline, total dedication, honor, and courage are still present in modern Japanese society, even though they have been modernized from their roots in Buddhism, Confucianism, and Shintoism. Thus, through Roland Barthes' semiotic lens, the film represents a new myth: not individual power, but the true strength that arises from solidarity, honor, and collective responsibility toward justice.

In this film, there is also a scene that highlights the theme of sacrifice for the greater good, when Smoky, the leader of the Rude Boys gang, chooses to stay behind and face the enemy alone in order to protect his community in Nameless Street. Despite being fully aware of the great risk to his own life, Smoky orders the other gang members to escape while he fights alone against the assault from the Kuryu Group.



Figure 3. Smoky sacrificing himself so his friends can evacuate the base
Source: Film streaming website Blibli.TV

In one of the film's emotional scenes, according to Roland Barthes' semiotic indicator of denotation, at minute 43:37, the character Smoky utters the line, "*Prepare to leave this place.*" At first glance, this statement sounds like a simple instruction to the Rude Boys members to evacuate from Nameless Street before the major assault from the Kuryu Group begins. However, denotatively, the sentence carries the literal meaning of an order to his community to escape from the imminent danger. This aligns with Daniel Chandler's explanation in *Semiotics: The Basics*, which states that denotation refers to the explicit meaning of a sign, understood directly without additional cultural or emotional layers. [27].

Through a connotative lens, the phrase “*leave this place*” is imbued with deep emotional meaning tied to space, identity, and collective memory. This resonates with research findings suggesting that memories, though often carrying emotional wounds, remain a crucial element in shaping one’s emotional identity [28]. The decision here does not merely signify a physical evacuation but also a profound emotional sacrifice: leaving behind a place that has long stood as a symbol of home, struggle, and togetherness. Smoky, fully aware that defending the territory would ultimately lead to destruction, chooses to stay and confront the danger alone a gesture that embodies compassion, loyalty, and the responsibility of a true leader.

At the mythical level, the phrase “*Prepare to leave this place*” spoken by Smoky in the emotional scene at minute 43:37 signifies more than just an evacuation order; it reflects a profound moral sacrifice of a leader. From Roland Barthes’ semiotic perspective, this act represents a mythological construction of noble leadership, where a marginalized figure chooses to bear the risks in order to protect his community. This contrast highlights the moral divide between Smoky—who prioritizes ethical responsibility—and the Kuryu Group, which symbolizes corrupt power driven by self-interest. A distinctly Japanese moral value embodied in this action is *giri* (義理), an ethical and social obligation that compels individuals to prioritize their duty to the group, even at the expense of personal interests. In Japanese culture, *giri* is regarded as the foundation of social relationships, emphasizing loyalty, devotion, and a sense of responsibility toward the community. Smoky’s conscious decision to stay behind and face the threat for the safety of others illustrates the true practice of *giri*. As explained by Sumiyoshi (2021), *giri* is a moral principle that motivates individuals to act not out of personal desire but as a form of dedication to their social ties and community (Sumiyoshi, 2021, in ejournal.undip.ac.id). Through this scene, the film symbolically constructs a myth of leadership based on sacrifice and social obligation as the highest form of collective morality [29].

At the beginning of the film’s plot, it is emphasized that the injustice committed by the Kuryu Group covering up past corruption by destroying the SWORD district and constructing a casino reflects a critique of the abuse of power. This is revealed early in the film at minute 02:58, highlighting the injustice carried out by the Kuryu Group, as illustrated in the dialogue shown in the image below.



Figure 4. Film plot highlighting the injustice involving the planned construction of a casino
Source: Film streaming website Blibli.TV

The statement regarding the Kuryu Group's casino construction plan, when analyzed denotatively, depicts a development project framed as an effort to modernize the SWORD district. The narrative promoted by the group, in collaboration with political elites, claims that the project aims to "build the nation" and "revitalize slum areas" into an economically productive zone. However, from the very beginning, the audience is shown that this development is not a genuine step for the public interest, but rather a façade designed to conceal a major corruption scandal between the government and corporate elites.

From a connotative perspective, this narrative carries a far more complex meaning. Phrases such as "concern for the nation" and "eradicating injustice" serve as forms of power rhetoric, often employed to mask hidden agendas and justify exploitative practices. In this context, the construction of the casino is not intended to address the underdevelopment or poverty of the SWORD community, but rather represents a new form of oppression packaged within the discourse of modernization. This development discourse is frequently used as a tool of domination rather than as a means of emancipation. This view aligns with the notion that language does not merely function as a medium of communication, but also as an ideological instrument that shapes power relations and reinforces social stratification within society [30].

In Roland Barthes' view, such practices can be categorized as a form of semiotic manipulation, in which signs that are generally associated with positive meanings – such as "development" or "social justice" – are distorted to conceal hidden negative intentions, such as land dispossession, forced eviction, or the erasure of a community's collective identity. At this point, the relationship between the signifier and the signified is detached from its original meaning and then reconstructed to support particular ideological interests [31].

At the myth level, the casino development plan by the Kuryu Group, which on the surface (denotatively) is depicted as a modernization and regional development project for SWORD, is in fact merely a tool to conceal political interests and corruption scandals committed by the ruling elite. From the perspective of Roland Barthes' semiotics, this practice represents a form of sign manipulation, in which terms such as "development" and "social justice" are exploited to disguise hidden agendas and mislead the public. At this point, a contemporary myth emerges – that the state and corporations always possess moral legitimacy when acting in the name of progress. However, in the context of this film, that myth is systematically challenged and deconstructed by the people of SWORD, who realize that the casino development is not intended for their benefit, but will instead exacerbate social inequality.

A study conducted by Universitas Muhammadiyah Ponorogo (2023) on the internalization of moral education at Tokyo Gakugei University shows that traditional Japanese ethical values particularly honesty, responsibility, and integrity are not only taught theoretically but also embodied in the daily practices of students. This moral education emphasizes the importance of harmony between thought, speech, and action, a principle in Japanese culture known as *makoto* (誠). This value plays a crucial role in shaping the character of the younger generation and demonstrates that traditional ethical heritage remains relevant in the modern era. These findings align with the representation in *High & Low The Movie 3: Final Mission*, where the honesty and courage of the SWORD characters in exposing the corruption of the Kuryu Group reflect the actualization of *makoto*. This value is not only alive within education but also manifested in the social practices of Japanese society [32].

At one of the critical points in the film, the courage to reveal the truth becomes a pivotal moment that shifts the course of the main characters' struggle. When Kohaku declares, "*The casino plan is all fake, we know the truth,*" he is not merely conveying information, but is explicitly risking his own safety to expose the corruption that has gripped their city.

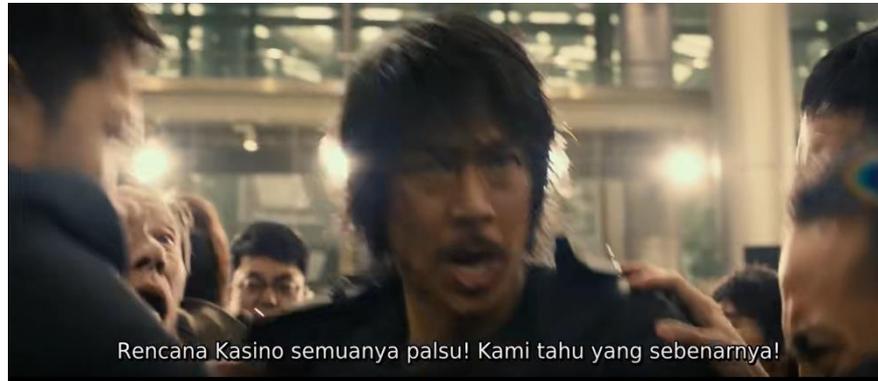


Figure 5. Kohaku revealing the truth to the media attending the event organized by Kuryu Group
Source: Film streaming website Bilibli.TV

This scene becomes a symbol of an individual's ideological shift. Kohaku, who was previously within the circle of power as a former member of Mugen, now chooses to side with truth and justice. This action is not only narratively crucial but also conveys a powerful moral message: that the courage to speak the truth represents the highest form of resistance against structured injustice, even when facing significant risks against those in power. [33].

Denotatively, Kohaku's dialogue is an explicit statement revealing that the casino development project is a fabrication intended to cover up corrupt practices. The remark is delivered openly in front of the media, marking a turning point in the collective struggle of the characters. Visual elements such as Kohaku's serious expression, the tense atmosphere, and the presence of the press reinforce that the statement is official, not merely speculative. Within the story's context, this serves as a direct form of communication not only to the in-narrative society but also to the audience as participants in the process of uncovering the truth [34].

Connotatively, Kohaku's words carry a much deeper meaning, encompassing courage, acknowledgment, and personal transformation. He is not merely exposing facts, but also deconstructing the false narrative constructed by those in power. Within Barthes' framework, Kohaku's action disrupts the ideological constructs of signs such as "development," which is often equated with progress, and "authority," which is assumed to always know what is best. Through his bravery, Kohaku creates a new meaning: development can signify oppression, and truth can emerge from those previously enmeshed within the system. This represents a process of myth deconstruction by revealing hidden realities. This aligns with Suryajaya's (2017) research, which analyzes how existing myths can be dismantled by uncovering the concealed realities behind constructed narratives [35].

At the mythical level, Kohaku's statement openly exposing the manipulation behind the Kuryu Group's casino development project becomes a symbol of significant ideological transformation. This action not only marks a narrative turning point but also dismantles the modern myth that power inherently brings truth and progress. Through his courage in revealing the facts before the media, Kohaku challenges the dominant narrative and raises awareness that the development project is merely a façade concealing systemic corruption.

He not only critiques authority but also atones for his past as part of the system he once supported.

The Japanese moral value highlighted in this context is *gaman* (我慢), which refers to the ability to endure, be patient, and remain steadfast when facing pressure, suffering, or danger for a greater purpose. In Japanese culture, *gaman* represents resilience and mental strength, highly esteemed especially when an individual chooses to act rightly despite high risks. Kohaku's courage in speaking the truth publicly, even at personal risk, reflects the value of *gaman*, as he endures both internal and external pressures to defend justice and truth. This action demonstrates that when confronting entrenched injustice, steadfastness and moral courage are key to changing the system. As explained in studies of Japanese culture, *gaman* is a principle that shapes strong character in facing challenges and serves as a foundation for building social commitment and ethical responsibility [36].

A critical moment in the film occurs when the truth is on the verge of being lost and lives hang in the balance: the SWORD members, together with their allies, demonstrate their true strength through solid teamwork and unwavering conviction. They not only engage in physical combat against formidable forces like the Kuryu Group, but also execute carefully planned strategies to secure crucial evidence, including documents and explosives used as diversionary tools. This collaboration is not a spontaneous act or momentary reaction; rather, it stems from a collective awareness that their struggle carries a profound moral value – uncovering structural lies and protecting the community from destruction [37].



Figure 6. Collaboration and unwavering determination in locating the bomb
Source: Film streaming website Bilibli.TV

In this scene, it is shown that the greatest strength does not come from weapons, troop numbers, or authority, but from solidarity and shared commitment in defending the truth. This view aligns with Sangiovanni (2025), who asserts that solidarity is not merely a fleeting emotional response but a social force built through collective commitment to confront shared challenges and uphold values of truth and justice in social life [38]. Denotatively, the scene depicts the unification of various gangs, previously marked by conflict, for a single goal: securing and delivering evidence to the media so that the crimes of the Kuryu Group can be exposed to the public. The characters set aside ego and past rivalries to carry out a larger collective mission. Through dialogue, determined facial expressions, and careful coordination during the infiltration and rescue actions, the film explicitly demonstrates the importance of teamwork and strategic planning in executing a decisive collective mission.

Connotatively, the cooperation built amidst dangerous situations in the film symbolizes trust, responsibility, and a shift in values from individualism toward collectivism. This collaboration represents a spirit of togetherness and social ethics, where

each individual no longer acts separately but becomes part of a collectively woven system of meaning. In this context, the joint actions of the characters reflect a moral struggle that is not only personal but also embodies a shared effort to uphold truth and justice [39], [40]. Within Barthes' semiotic framework, these actions can be read as a system of signs representing collective ethics, in which each individual is not merely a standalone actor but part of an interconnected social meaning network. The trust that develops among gang members, along with the moral awareness that evidence of wrongdoing must reach the public, symbolizes that true power arises from unity. Personal identities merge into a communal identity, driven by a determination to uphold truth.

At the mythical level, the cross-gang collaboration depicted in this scene is not merely a dramatic moment but a symbol of dismantling the classic single-hero myth in action films. Rather than relying on an individual with extraordinary power, the film emphasizes that true strength emerges from the collective solidarity of a shared vision a revolutionary approach to resisting a system of singular domination. The prominent Japanese moral value in this scene is *wa* (和), which signifies social harmony as the foundational principle of collective interaction. In Japanese culture, *wa* emphasizes balance, concord, and respect for relationships among group members. When the SWORD gangs set aside ego and past rivalries, they enact *wa* in practice, creating harmony through joint action to uphold justice. This is the essence of *wa*: establishing social stability through sincere collaboration, prioritizing collective interests over individual ones, and maintaining relationships that are mutually reinforcing. From Roland Barthes' perspective, this act of solidarity is not merely a narrative move but a sign codifying a new myth: it is not the individual who defeats injustice, but the united community. The film celebrates *wa* as a collective moral force, conveying that harmony and solidarity are powerful instruments for dismantling oppressive systems and establishing social justice [41].

Based on the discussion, it can be concluded that *High & Low The Movie 3: Final Mission* consistently represents moral messages through its narrative structure, characters, and visual elements, analyzed using Roland Barthes' semiotic approach. Through the three levels of meaning denotation, connotation, and myth the film conveys values of solidarity, courage, sacrifice, and resistance against injustice in a profound and symbolic manner. Key scenes, such as the unity of the SWORD district gangs, Smoky's self-sacrifice, and Kohaku's bravery in revealing the truth, construct a strong moral narrative emphasizing the importance of collaboration and integrity when confronting corrupt power. Denotatively, these actions reflect direct responses to conflicts within the story; connotatively, they carry emotional, social, and ethical significance; and at the mythic level, they function as resistance against dominant narratives such as the single-hero myth, the legitimacy of development, and absolute power. The film overturns conventional discourse in action cinema by establishing a new myth: true strength does not reside in individuals, but in collective solidarity and the courage of ordinary people to uphold truth and justice.

CONCLUSION

This study systematically reveals that the representation of moral messages in *High & Low The Movie 3: Final Mission* is conveyed through the three layers of meaning in Roland Barthes' semiotic framework: denotation, connotation, and myth. Among the various moral messages identified, solidarity and unity emerge as the most dominant and influential in shaping the overall narrative of the film. This solidarity is vividly depicted in the dramatic scene where all the previously conflicting gangs in the SWORD district choose to unite against the corrupt and manipulative power of the Kuryu Group. Through the

simple yet meaningful statement, “Sannoh Rengokai is on your side,” the film not only conveys literal support (denotation) but also builds connotative meaning of trust and loyalty between groups, and at the mythic level, becomes a symbol of collective resistance against injustice. This representation demonstrates that true strength does not lie in individual power, but in the courage to set aside ego and foster solidarity in the pursuit of shared truth and justice.

These findings directly address the research objective, which is to examine how moral messages are represented in films using Barthes’ semiotic approach. Theoretical implications of this study enrich the field of semiotics, particularly in the context of international films that are rarely analyzed in Indonesia, by showing how moral meaning is constructed not only through verbal narrative but also through symbols, actions, and social relationships between characters. Practically, this research provides new insights for filmmakers, educators, and the wider public about the importance of presenting moral values in popular media. Films are no longer positioned merely as entertainment, but also as tools for character education, social reflection, and cultural resistance against oppressive power structures. These findings also open opportunities for further research to explore how other visual media, such as series, music videos, or advertisements, can serve as platforms for representing moral messages within an increasingly complex global cultural context.

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Representation of Moral Messages in the Film *High & Low The Movie 3: Final Mission* (Roland Barthes' Semiotic Analysis)

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ABSTRACT

The film industry today is not limited to entertainment alone but also plays an important role as a medium for delivering moral messages to society. One international film that strongly represents moral values is *High & Low The Movie 3: Final Mission*. The urgency of this study lies in the lack of research employing Roland Barthes' semiotics to analyze moral messages in *High & Low The Movie 3: Final Mission*. This study aims to analyze how moral messages are represented in the film, focusing on how these meanings are constructed and conveyed through narrative and visual elements. The search was conducted using a qualitative descriptive method by applying Roland Barthes' semiotic approach, which includes three stages of analysis: denotation, connotation, and myth. Data were collected through observation of significant scenes in the film as well as documentation from various supporting literature. The findings reveal that *High & Low The Movie 3: Final Mission* represents moral messages through the values of solidarity, courage, and sacrifice demonstrated in the actions of the main characters. The film deconstructs dominant myths related to power, development, and individual heroism, while constructing a new narrative about the collective strength of society in resisting injustice. The conclusion of this study affirms that films can serve as an effective medium in delivering moral values and shaping social awareness. Future research is recommended to explore the representation of moral messages in other film genres or in digital-based visual media.

INTRODUCTION

The journey of the Indonesian film industry has gone through various dynamics from the colonial era to the present day. In the early 20th century, European films were introduced by the Dutch colonizers as a form of entertainment for the colonial society. After Indonesia gained independence, the local film industry began to develop with an increase in film production. However, in the 1990s, Indonesian cinema experienced a significant decline due to various challenges. A revival occurred in the early 2000s, marked by the growth in film production, improved quality, and a rising number of audiences. This indicates that films in Indonesia not only serve as a medium of entertainment but also function as a tool for conveying relevant social and cultural messages [1].

One social phenomenon relevant to the narrative of *High & Low The Movie 3: Final Mission* is kodokushi, or dying in solitude. Kodokushi refers to a condition in which a person, particularly the elderly, passes away without anyone noticing for a considerable

period of time. This phenomenon has become increasingly prevalent in Japan, along with the rising number of elderly people living alone and the weakening of social bonds and the nuclear family. A study by Putri Elsy, Wirawan, and Saptandari (2024) reveals that kodokushi is a consequence of the *Juggernaut of Modernity* as described by Anthony Giddens—rapid, massive, and uncontrollable social change. The main causes of this phenomenon include the rise of individualistic lifestyles, the culture of *meiwaku o kakenai* (a reluctance to trouble others), and the transformation of family structures from extended families to nuclear families. This study emphasizes that kodokushi is not merely a personal issue but also a social phenomenon that reflects the challenges of modern Japanese society in maintaining social solidarity amid the strong currents of modernization [2].

In addition, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the phenomenon of kodokushi gained increased academic attention due to the rise in cases of social isolation among the elderly. Putri Elsy, Wirawan, and Saptandari (2024), in their study published in *Mozaik Humaniora*, explain that kodokushi is a consequence of the *Juggernaut of Modernity* as described by Anthony Giddens, in which rapid modernization and urbanization have weakened social bonds and reduced interpersonal interactions. The COVID-19 pandemic worsened this condition, as social restrictions further isolated the elderly, while limited digital access hindered them from staying connected with family or communities. The study emphasizes that the weakness of Japan's social support system is a key factor increasing the risk of kodokushi. Thus, this issue is no longer merely an individual matter but a social problem that requires collective intervention from the government, society, and social institutions [2].

The phenomenon of kodokushi reflects the weakness of social solidarity and the lack of collective responsibility in modern society. In the context of *High & Low The Movie 3: Final Mission*, central themes such as individual sacrifice, courage in confronting injustice, and group solidarity are closely related to this social issue. Through Roland Barthes' semiotic approach, the film can be read as a critique of the decline of collective values and as an emphasis on the importance of rebuilding social solidarity to prevent alienation and moral decay. The moral messages represented in the film function not only as entertainment but also as a reflection of real social phenomena currently occurring in Japan.

In media and cultural studies, the concept of representation is crucial in shaping social meaning through symbols and visually constructed narratives. Rio Febriannur Rachman (2020) explains that representation is the process of conveying ideas, values, and ideologies through visual and narrative constructions in film. He emphasizes how film is used as a medium for delivering messages, with visual analysis, discourse analysis, and content analysis as the primary methods for understanding the construction of meaning [3]. Selain itu, dalam kajian representasi nilai sosial budaya pada film pendek *Pamean*, Merlin Furthermore, in a study on the representation of socio-cultural values in the short film *Pamean*, Merlin Yupitasari (2024) demonstrates how visual symbols, language, and narratives are used to represent social realities—such as livelihood systems, forms of greeting, technological advancement, and the spirit of mutual cooperation within society. This study applies Peirce's semiotic approach to decompose signs into icons, indexes, and symbols [4].

Moral messages are ethical values, teachings, or social norms conveyed through media, either explicitly through dialogue or implicitly through characters' actions, plotlines, or visual symbols. These messages aim to provide life lessons, shape attitudes, and strengthen the audience's awareness of goodness and values in social life. In the context of character education, Tsoraya et al. (2023) emphasize that character education is highly

necessary in the digital era to shape a moral generation that fosters a sense of responsibility including in the use of technology as well as spiritual and ethical aspects as the foundation of social interaction within society [5]. Additionally, Pebriani et al. (2023) highlight the internalization of ethical values in social media from the perspective of Islamic Religious Education. They reveal that teachers play a crucial role in instilling honesty, courtesy, and responsibility when students engage with digital media, so that the process of ethical representation occurs not only cognitively but also in the formation of concrete attitudes [6].

One of the best films from Japan, *High & Low The Movie 3: Final Mission*, is an action film released in 2017 as part of the *High & Low* franchise. The film continues the story of the conflict between the SWORD gang and the yakuza organization Kuryu Group, focusing on SWORD's efforts to stop the Kuryu Group's plan to destroy their district in order to cover up a corruption scandal and build a casino. This film reflects the development of the Japanese film industry, which increasingly highlights complex narratives, profound characters, as well as intense action scenes and engaging fight choreography. Values such as friendship, courage, and justice serve as the core of the story presented [7].

This film centers on the struggles of the main characters and the members of the SWORD gang as they face various challenges that test their sense of justice and morality. It raises a major theme of the conflict between good and evil, where the characters are confronted with difficult choices that challenge their courage and integrity. In addition to offering spectacular action, the film also conveys a profound moral message about the importance of sacrifice and bravery in fighting against injustice. With its complex characters and suspenseful storyline, the film successfully captivates audiences while encouraging reflection on the values it portrays [8]. The film reached the top position at the Japanese box office during its opening week.



Figure 1. Official poster of the film *High & Low The Movie 3: Final Mission*
Source: Official Instagram account @high_low_official

The representation of moral messages in this film refers to how ethical values and life lessons are conveyed through narrative, characters, and visualization. Moral messages can be delivered explicitly through dialogue or implicitly through actions and story development. In *High & Low The Movie 3: Final Mission*, the moral messages conveyed include the importance of solidarity in facing injustice, the courage to resist corruption, and the power of friendship. The characters in the film demonstrate dedication to protecting their community, even when faced with great risks, reflecting the values of courage and sacrifice [9], [10].

As a medium of mass communication, film holds great potential to convey moral messages that can influence people's behavior and perspectives. One film that is relevant to be analyzed in this context is *High & Low The Movie 3: Final Mission*. This film not only offers entertainment but also serves as a vehicle for delivering moral messages that can be understood through a semiotic approach, particularly Roland Barthes' theory. In today's social conditions, where moral principles are often questioned or disregarded, it is important to examine how film can function as a means of character education and in shaping the behavior of its audience [11].

The semiotic approach proposed by Roland Barthes provides an analytical tool that enables a deeper understanding of the meanings contained within a film. Through three stages of analysis denotation, connotation, and myth the researcher can uncover how moral messages are designed to be conveyed to the audience and how the audience interprets them [11]. Previous studies using the semiotic approach have shown that analyzing the representation of moral messages in films can shape profound experiences regarding the social values upheld by society [12]. However, semiotic analysis of this particular film remains limited, and thus this study is expected to fill that gap.

This study offers significant novelty compared to previous research. The study by Natalia et al. (2024) [13]. Employed Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic approach to examine moral messages in *My Annoying Brother*. In contrast, this research adopts Roland Barthes' semiotic approach, placing greater emphasis on the analysis of denotative, connotative, and mythical meanings. Meanwhile, studies conducted by Arista et al. (2022) and Larasati et al [14], [11], also applied Barthes' approach but focused on local films such as *Unbaedah* and *Lamun Sumelang*. This study differs in that it examines a renowned film from Japan, *High & Low The Movie 3: Final Mission*, which carries higher complexity in terms of culture, narrative, and visual elements. Thus, this research enriches the literature on film semiotics by exploring the representation of moral messages within the context of diverse global cultures.

This research takes into account a number of previous studies relevant to supporting the analysis of the representation of moral messages in film. The study conducted by Natalia and Ratriandita (2024) examined the film *My Annoying Brother* as the research object and applied Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic approach to analyze the representation of moral messages contained within its narrative and characters [15]. Although the topic and approach differ, that study shares similarities with this research in its focus on the representation of moral values in the medium of film. The difference lies in the theoretical framework used, as their study did not employ Roland Barthes' approach, and the film analyzed was a South Korean production that tends to emphasize the emotional dynamics of family.

Meanwhile, the study by Arista and Sudarmillah (2022) examined moral messages in the local film *Unbaedah* by Iqbaal Arieffurahman. This research applied Roland Barthes' semiotic approach to identify the structure of meaning in the film, focusing on local social and cultural values [16]. The similarity with this study lies in the use of Barthesian analysis to uncover layers of meaning in moral messages. However, their research object was rooted in an Indonesian local film that reflects a domestic social context, whereas this study analyzes a Japanese film, *High & Low The Movie 3: Final Mission*, which is rich in Japanese cultural values such as group loyalty, collective spirit, and sacrifice as integral parts of its narrative of action and resistance against injustice.

Another study by Larasati and Indriyani (2022) examined the representation of moral messages in the short film *Lamun Sumelang*, also using Roland Barthes' semiotic approach. Their research dissected the moral messages represented through visual symbolism and the short narrative structure [17]. The similarity between their study and this research lies in the use of Barthes' analytical framework and the focus on moral representation. However, a significant difference lies in the duration and cultural context of the films analyzed. *Lamun Sumelang*, as a local short film, represents the distinctive social values of Indonesian society, whereas the object of this study is a Japanese action film that not only conveys universal moral values but also reflects the complexities of modern Japanese culture, intertwined with cinematic myths and distinctive elements of the yakuza world and gang dynamics.

From this comparison, the novelty of this research lies in selecting the Japanese film *High & Low The Movie 3: Final Mission* as the object of a Roland Barthes semiotic study in the context of moral messages. This film not only offers engaging action visualization but also presents complex social dynamics, ranging from resistance against corruption, group solidarity, to individual sacrifice for the greater good. The moral values contained in the film are examined in depth through Barthes' three levels of meaning denotative, connotative, and mythical. Based on this background, the purpose of this research is to analyze how the representation of moral messages is constructed in *High & Low The Movie 3: Final Mission* using Roland Barthes' semiotic approach. The study focuses on how messages such as solidarity, sacrifice, and courage are communicated through narrative and visual elements, as well as how these meanings are interpreted ideologically within the context of contemporary Japanese culture.

Theoretically, this research contributes to the development of film semiotics studies by expanding the application of Roland Barthes' theory in the context of non-local cinema, which is rich in cultural symbolism and complex narratives. This study also enriches the discourse on film as a medium of moral communication, particularly within the realm of Japanese popular culture, which is relatively underexplored in Indonesian academic contexts. Practically, this research provides benefits for filmmakers, educators, and scholars of visual culture. For filmmakers, the findings can serve as a reference in designing strong and meaningful moral messages in audio-visual works. For educators, this film can be used as learning material to instill character values through popular media. Meanwhile, for researchers and students, this study opens further avenues for exploring the representation of moral values in cross-cultural visual media through a deep and reflective qualitative approach.

RESEARCH METHOD

The approach underlying this study is qualitative descriptive research, aimed at examining in depth the representation of moral messages in this film through Roland Barthes' semiotics. This method is naturalistic, in which the researcher seeks to understand phenomena in their original context [18]. Data were collected through observation and documentation. Observation was carried out by examining scenes involving character interactions, symbols, and dialogues that contained moral messages, while documentation was used to obtain data from relevant journals and literature [19]. This study applied purposive sampling, selecting scenes most relevant to the research objectives. Primary data were obtained from direct observation of the film, while secondary data were drawn from various references supporting the analysis [20].

The analysis was conducted using Roland Barthes' semiotic concept, which consists of three levels: denotation, connotation, and myth. Denotation refers to the literal meaning of signs, connotation describes broader meanings related to social and cultural values, while myth reflects the complex meanings formed from the interaction of the two [18]. The analytical process included reviewing the film, selecting scenes, and interpreting symbols, gestures, and visual elements to uncover moral messages [21]. To enhance data validity, source triangulation was applied by comparing various references [22].

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The representation of moral messages in film refers to the way ethical norms, social values, and life lessons are conveyed through narrative, characters, and visual elements. The representation of moral values is analyzed from a number of scenes containing moral messages, with a focus on how these messages are realized or presented in each scene [23]. Moral messages may be delivered explicitly through dialogue or implicitly through character actions and symbolism within the story. In Roland Barthes' semiotic study, the representation of moral messages is analyzed through three layers of meaning: denotation, connotation, and myth, which help uncover the hidden meanings behind the film's elements [24].

The life lessons that can be drawn from this film include values such as solidarity and unity. The film portrays how the gangs in the SWORD district come together to fight against the corrupt Kuryu Group. This solidarity is reflected in scenes where they set aside their differences for a common goal.



Figure 2. Several gangs unite against the crimes of the Kuryu Group
Source: Film streaming website Bilibli.TV

At minute 1:04:50 in the film, there is a climactic scene that highlights a pivotal moment of unity among the SWORD district gangs. This scene shows all the major groups Sannoh Rengokai, White Rascals, Rude Boys, Daruma Ikka, and Oya Koukou gathering to devise a joint strategy against the threat posed by the Kuryu Group. In the midst of the tense situation, one member of Sannoh Rengokai firmly declares, "Sannoh Rengokai is on your side."

Denotatively, this statement conveys the explicit support of Sannoh Rengokai for the other groups. It demonstrates a unified stance, even though they previously had conflicting backgrounds and distinct group identities. This declaration reflects that, when facing a greater threat, a sense of solidarity can unite groups that were once divided.

However, through Roland Barthes' semiotic approach, the statement carries a deeper connotative meaning. The seemingly simple sentence symbolizes solidarity, trust, and a sense of collective responsibility. In the context of popular culture, where street gangs are often portrayed as symbols of chaos and anarchy, this film instead presents a counter-narrative. The expressed support is not merely a strategic alliance, but also an embodiment of moral values and social ethics that emphasize the importance of collaboration. [25].

At the myth level, the dialogue "Sannoh Rengokai is on your side" in *High & Low The Movie 3: Final Mission* evokes a symbolic alignment with justice and reinforces the ideological narrative of collective solidarity against systemic injustice. Beyond affirming the alliance among gangs, the dialogue embodies noble Japanese cultural values such as the principles of Bushidō: loyalty (*chūgi*) and honor (*meiyo*), reflected in the characters' readiness to unite in defending their community and transforming the image of gangs from symbols of chaos into moral and responsible entities. According to Bambang Wibawarta's study (2006) in *Wacana* journal, the values of Bushidō loyalty, discipline, total dedication, honor, and courage are still present in modern Japanese society, even though they have been modernized from their roots in Buddhism, Confucianism, and Shintoism. Thus, through Roland Barthes' semiotic lens, the film represents a new myth: not individual power, but the true strength that arises from solidarity, honor, and collective responsibility toward justice.

In this film, there is also a scene that highlights the theme of sacrifice for the greater good, when Smoky, the leader of the Rude Boys gang, chooses to stay behind and face the enemy alone in order to protect his community in Nameless Street. Despite being fully aware of the great risk to his own life, Smoky orders the other gang members to escape while he fights alone against the assault from the Kuryu Group.



Figure 3. Smoky sacrificing himself so his friends can evacuate the base
Source: Film streaming website Bilibili.TV

In one of the film's emotional scenes, according to Roland Barthes' semiotic indicator of denotation, at minute 43:37, the character Smoky utters the line, "Prepare to leave this place." At first glance, this statement sounds like a simple instruction to the Rude Boys members to evacuate from Nameless Street before the major assault from the Kuryu Group begins. However, denotatively, the sentence carries the literal meaning of an order to his community to escape from the imminent danger. This aligns with Daniel Chandler's explanation in *Semiotics: The Basics*, which states that denotation refers to the explicit meaning of a sign, understood directly without additional cultural or emotional layers. [27].

Through a connotative lens, the phrase “leave this place” is imbued with deep emotional meaning tied to space, identity, and collective memory. This resonates with research findings suggesting that memories, though often carrying emotional wounds, remain a crucial element in shaping one’s emotional identity [28]. The decision here does not merely signify a physical evacuation but also a profound emotional sacrifice: leaving behind a place that has long stood as a symbol of home, struggle, and togetherness. Smoky, fully aware that defending the territory would ultimately lead to destruction, chooses to stay and confront the danger alone a gesture that embodies compassion, loyalty, and the responsibility of a true leader.

At the mythical level, the phrase “Prepare to leave this place” spoken by Smoky in the emotional scene at minute 43:37 signifies more than just an evacuation order; it reflects a profound moral sacrifice of a leader. From Roland Barthes’ semiotic perspective, this act represents a mythological construction of noble leadership, where a marginalized figure chooses to bear the risks in order to protect his community. This contrast highlights the moral divide between Smoky—who prioritizes ethical responsibility—and the Kuryu Group, which symbolizes corrupt power driven by self-interest. A distinctly Japanese moral value embodied in this action is *giri* (義理), an ethical and social obligation that compels individuals to prioritize their duty to the group, even at the expense of personal interests. In Japanese culture, *giri* is regarded as the foundation of social relationships, emphasizing loyalty, devotion, and a sense of responsibility toward the community. Smoky’s conscious decision to stay behind and face the threat for the safety of others illustrates the true practice of *giri*. As explained by Sumiyoshi (2021), *giri* is a moral principle that motivates individuals to act not out of personal desire but as a form of dedication to their social ties and community (Sumiyoshi, 2021, in ejournal.undip.ac.id). Through this scene, the film symbolically constructs a myth of leadership based on sacrifice and social obligation as the highest form of collective morality [29].

At the beginning of the film’s plot, it is emphasized that the injustice committed by the Kuryu Group covering up past corruption by destroying the SWORD district and constructing a casino reflects a critique of the abuse of power. This is revealed early in the film at minute 02:58, highlighting the injustice carried out by the Kuryu Group, as illustrated in the dialogue shown in the image below.



Figure 4. Film plot highlighting the injustice involving the planned construction of a casino
Source: Film streaming website Bliibi.TV

The statement regarding the Kuryu Group's casino construction plan, when analyzed denotatively, depicts a development project framed as an effort to modernize the SWORD district. The narrative promoted by the group, in collaboration with political elites, claims that the project aims to "build the nation" and "revitalize slum areas" into an economically productive zone. However, from the very beginning, the audience is shown that this development is not a genuine step for the public interest, but rather a façade designed to conceal a major corruption scandal between the government and corporate elites.

From a connotative perspective, this narrative carries a far more complex meaning. Phrases such as "concern for the nation" and "eradicating injustice" serve as forms of power rhetoric, often employed to mask hidden agendas and justify exploitative practices. In this context, the construction of the casino is not intended to address the underdevelopment or poverty of the SWORD community, but rather represents a new form of oppression packaged within the discourse of modernization. This development discourse is frequently used as a tool of domination rather than as a means of emancipation. This view aligns with the notion that language does not merely function as a medium of communication, but also as an ideological instrument that shapes power relations and reinforces social stratification within society [30].

In Roland Barthes' view, such practices can be categorized as a form of semiotic manipulation, in which signs that are generally associated with positive meanings—such as "development" or "social justice"—are distorted to conceal hidden negative intentions, such as land dispossession, forced eviction, or the erasure of a community's collective identity. At this point, the relationship between the signifier and the signified is detached from its original meaning and then reconstructed to support particular ideological interests [31].

At the myth level, the casino development plan by the Kuryu Group, which on the surface (denotatively) is depicted as a modernization and regional development project for SWORD, is in fact merely a tool to conceal political interests and corruption scandals committed by the ruling elite. From the perspective of Roland Barthes' semiotics, this practice represents a form of sign manipulation, in which terms such as "development" and "social justice" are exploited to disguise hidden agendas and mislead the public. At this point, a contemporary myth emerges—that the state and corporations always possess moral legitimacy when acting in the name of progress. However, in the context of this film, that myth is systematically challenged and deconstructed by the people of SWORD, who realize that the casino development is not intended for their benefit, but will instead exacerbate social inequality.

A study conducted by Universitas Muhammadiyah Ponorogo (2023) on the internalization of moral education at Tokyo Gakugei University shows that traditional Japanese ethical values particularly honesty, responsibility, and integrity are not only taught theoretically but also embodied in the daily practices of students. This moral education emphasizes the importance of harmony between thought, speech, and action, a principle in Japanese culture known as *makoto* (誠). This value plays a crucial role in shaping the character of the younger generation and demonstrates that traditional ethical heritage remains relevant in the modern era. These findings align with the representation in *High & Low The Movie 3: Final Mission*, where the honesty and courage of the SWORD characters in exposing the corruption of the Kuryu Group reflect the actualization of *makoto*. This value is not only alive within education but also manifested in the social practices of Japanese society [32].

At one of the critical points in the film, the courage to reveal the truth becomes a pivotal moment that shifts the course of the main characters' struggle. When Kohaku declares, "*The casino plan is all fake, we know the truth,*" he is not merely conveying information, but is explicitly risking his own safety to expose the corruption that has gripped their city.



Figure 5. Kohaku revealing the truth to the media attending the event organized by Kuryu Group
Source: Film streaming website Blibli.TV

This scene becomes a symbol of an individual's ideological shift. Kohaku, who was previously within the circle of power as a former member of Mugen, now chooses to side with truth and justice. This action is not only narratively crucial but also conveys a powerful moral message: that the courage to speak the truth represents the highest form of resistance against structured injustice, even when facing significant risks against those in power. [33].

Denotatively, Kohaku's dialogue is an explicit statement revealing that the casino development project is a fabrication intended to cover up corrupt practices. The remark is delivered openly in front of the media, marking a turning point in the collective struggle of the characters. Visual elements such as Kohaku's serious expression, the tense atmosphere, and the presence of the press reinforce that the statement is official, not merely speculative. Within the story's context, this serves as a direct form of communication not only to the in-narrative society but also to the audience as participants in the process of uncovering the truth [34].

Connotatively, Kohaku's words carry a much deeper meaning, encompassing courage, acknowledgment, and personal transformation. He is not merely exposing facts, but also deconstructing the false narrative constructed by those in power. Within Barthes' framework, Kohaku's action disrupts the ideological constructs of signs such as "development," which is often equated with progress, and "authority," which is assumed to always know what is best. Through his bravery, Kohaku creates a new meaning: development can signify oppression, and truth can emerge from those previously enmeshed within the system. This represents a process of myth deconstruction by revealing hidden realities. This aligns with Suryajaya's (2017) research, which analyzes how existing myths can be dismantled by uncovering the concealed realities behind constructed narratives [35].

At the mythical level, Kohaku's statement openly exposing the manipulation behind the Kuryu Group's casino development project becomes a symbol of significant ideological transformation. This action not only marks a narrative turning point but also dismantles the modern myth that power inherently brings truth and progress. Through his courage in revealing the facts before the media, Kohaku challenges the dominant narrative and raises awareness that the development project is merely a façade concealing systemic corruption.

He not only critiques authority but also atones for his past as part of the system he once supported.

The Japanese moral value highlighted in this context is *gaman* (我慢), which refers to the ability to endure, be patient, and remain steadfast when facing pressure, suffering, or danger for a greater purpose. In Japanese culture, *gaman* represents resilience and mental strength, highly esteemed especially when an individual chooses to act rightly despite high risks. Kohaku's courage in speaking the truth publicly, even at personal risk, reflects the value of *gaman*, as he endures both internal and external pressures to defend justice and truth. This action demonstrates that when confronting entrenched injustice, steadfastness and moral courage are key to changing the system. As explained in studies of Japanese culture, *gaman* is a principle that shapes strong character in facing challenges and serves as a foundation for building social commitment and ethical responsibility [36].

A critical moment in the film occurs when the truth is on the verge of being lost and lives hang in the balance: the SWORD members, together with their allies, demonstrate their true strength through solid teamwork and unwavering conviction. They not only engage in physical combat against formidable forces like the Kuryu Group, but also execute carefully planned strategies to secure crucial evidence, including documents and explosives used as diversionary tools. This collaboration is not a spontaneous act or momentary reaction; rather, it stems from a collective awareness that their struggle carries a profound moral value—uncovering structural lies and protecting the community from destruction [37].



Figure 6. Collaboration and unwavering determination in locating the bomb
Source: Film streaming website Bilibli.TV

In this scene, it is shown that the greatest strength does not come from weapons, troop numbers, or authority, but from solidarity and shared commitment in defending the truth. This view aligns with Sangiovanni (2025), who asserts that solidarity is not merely a fleeting emotional response but a social force built through collective commitment to confront shared challenges and uphold values of truth and justice in social life [38]. Denotatively, the scene depicts the unification of various gangs, previously marked by conflict, for a single goal: securing and delivering evidence to the media so that the crimes of the Kuryu Group can be exposed to the public. The characters set aside ego and past rivalries to carry out a larger collective mission. Through dialogue, determined facial expressions, and careful coordination during the infiltration and rescue actions, the film explicitly demonstrates the importance of teamwork and strategic planning in executing a decisive collective mission.

Connotatively, the cooperation built amidst dangerous situations in the film symbolizes trust, responsibility, and a shift in values from individualism toward collectivism. This collaboration represents a spirit of togetherness and social ethics, where

each individual no longer acts separately but becomes part of a collectively woven system of meaning. In this context, the joint actions of the characters reflect a moral struggle that is not only personal but also embodies a shared effort to uphold truth and justice [39], [40]. Within Barthes' semiotic framework, these actions can be read as a system of signs representing collective ethics, in which each individual is not merely a standalone actor but part of an interconnected social meaning network. The trust that develops among gang members, along with the moral awareness that evidence of wrongdoing must reach the public, symbolizes that true power arises from unity. Personal identities merge into a communal identity, driven by a determination to uphold truth.

At the mythical level, the cross-gang collaboration depicted in this scene is not merely a dramatic moment but a symbol of dismantling the classic single-hero myth in action films. Rather than relying on an individual with extraordinary power, the film emphasizes that true strength emerges from the collective solidarity of a shared vision a revolutionary approach to resisting a system of singular domination. The prominent Japanese moral value in this scene is *wa* (和), which signifies social harmony as the foundational principle of collective interaction. In Japanese culture, *wa* emphasizes balance, concord, and respect for relationships among group members. When the SWORD gangs set aside ego and past rivalries, they enact *wa* in practice, creating harmony through joint action to uphold justice. This is the essence of *wa*: establishing social stability through sincere collaboration, prioritizing collective interests over individual ones, and maintaining relationships that are mutually reinforcing. From Roland Barthes' perspective, this act of solidarity is not merely a narrative move but a sign codifying a new myth: it is not the individual who defeats injustice, but the united community. The film celebrates *wa* as a collective moral force, conveying that harmony and solidarity are powerful instruments for dismantling oppressive systems and establishing social justice [41].

¹⁷Based on the discussion, it can be concluded that High & Low The Movie 3: Final Mission consistently represent¹² moral messages through its narrative structure, characters, and visual elements, analyzed using Roland Barthes' semiotic approach. Through the three levels of meaning denotation, connotation, and myth the film conveys values of solidarity, courage, sacrifice, and resistance against injustice in a profound and symbolic manner. Key scenes, such as the unity of the SWORD district gangs, Smoky's self-sacrifice, and Kohaku's bravery in revealing the truth, construct a strong moral narrative emphasizing the importance of collaboration and integrity when confronting corrupt power. Denotatively, these actions reflect direct responses to conflicts within the story; connotatively, they carry emotional, social, and ethical significance; and at the mythic level, they function as resistance against dominant narratives such as the single-hero myth, the legitimacy of development, and absolute power. The film overturns conventional discourse in action cinema by establishing a new myth: true strength does not reside in individuals, but in collective solidarity and the courage of ordinary people to uphold truth and justice.

CONCLUSION

This study systematically reveals that the representation of moral messages¹ in High & Low The Movie 3: Final Mission is conveyed through the three layers of meaning in Roland Barthes' semiotic framework: denotation, connotation, and myth. Among the various moral messages identified, solidarity and unity emerge as the most dominant and influential in shaping the overall narrative of the film. This solidarity is vividly depicted in the dramatic scene where all the previously conflicting gangs in the SWORD district choose to unite against the corrupt and manipulative power of the Kuryu Group. Through the simple yet meaningful statement, "Sannoh Rengokai is on your side," the film not only

conveys literal support (denotation) but also builds connotative meaning of trust and loyalty between groups, and at the mythic level, becomes a symbol of collective resistance against injustice. This representation demonstrates that true strength does not lie in individual power, but in the courage to set aside ego and foster solidarity in the pursuit of shared truth and justice.

These findings directly address the research objective, which is to examine how moral messages are represented in films using Barthes' semiotic approach. Theoretical implications of this study enrich the field of semiotics, particularly in the context of international films that are rarely analyzed in Indonesia, by showing how moral meaning is constructed not only through verbal narrative but also through symbols, actions, and social relationships between characters. Practically, this research provides new insights for filmmakers, educators, and the wider public about the importance of presenting moral values in popular media. Films are no longer positioned merely as entertainment, but also as tools for character education, social reflection, and cultural resistance against oppressive power structures. These findings also open opportunities for further research to explore how other visual media, such as series, music videos, or advertisements, can serve as platforms for representing moral messages within an increasingly complex global cultural context.

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