

Deciphering Visual Signs in *Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows* (2011) Through Barthesian Lens

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ABSTRACT

Semiotics serves as an instrument to reveal the identity of an entity and demonstrate how visual and auditory elements construct meaning, convey messages, shape characters, establish atmospheres, and represent cultural and ideological values in cinematic works. This research aims to identify and analyze how signs are represented in the film *Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows* (2011). The study applies Roland Barthes' semiotic theory to uncover the layers of meaning embedded in the film's objects and events, specifically focusing on denotation, connotation, and myth. This research utilized a descriptive qualitative method. The primary data source was the film itself, from which scenes and objects were selected based on their narrative centrality. The results of this research show that these signs do not merely function as aesthetic narrative devices; they are semiotic mechanisms used to construct deeper ideological meanings. The red strings map signifies Knowledge; the orchestration of war signifies Industrialization; and the chess match signifies Control. Ultimately, what can be underlined in this research is that the film utilizes these signs to establish a core theme of intellectual dominance, portraying the victory of rationality and strategic observation over manufactured systemic chaos.

Keywords: Semiotics, Roland Barthes, Sign, Myth, *Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows* (2011)

ABSTRAK

Semiotika digunakan sebagai instrumen yang menunjukkan jati diri suatu entitas dan mengungkap bagaimana tanda-tanda visual dan audio digunakan untuk membangun makna, menyampaikan pesan, membentuk karakter, menciptakan suasana, serta merepresentasikan nilai-nilai budaya dan ideologi dalam karya sinematik. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengidentifikasi dan menganalisis bagaimana tanda-tanda direpresentasikan dalam film *Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows* (2011). Penelitian ini menerapkan teori semiotika Roland Barthes untuk mengungkap lapisan makna yang terkandung dalam objek dan peristiwa dalam film tersebut, dengan fokus khusus pada denotasi, konotasi, dan mitos. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif deskriptif. Sumber data utama adalah film itu sendiri, di mana adegan dan objek dipilih berdasarkan sentralitas naratifnya. Hasil penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa tanda-tanda ini tidak hanya berfungsi sebagai perangkat naratif estetis; mereka adalah mekanisme semiotika yang digunakan untuk membangun makna ideologis yang lebih dalam. Peta benang merah melambangkan Pengetahuan; orkestrasi perang melambangkan Industrialisasi; dan pertandingan catur melambangkan Kontrol. Pada akhirnya, yang dapat digarisbawahi pada penelitian ini yaitu film tersebut menggunakan tanda-tanda ini untuk membangun tema utama dominasi intelektual, yang menggambarkan kemenangan rasionalitas dan observasi strategis atas kekacauan sistemik yang direkayasa.

Kata kunci: Semiotika, Roland Barthes, Tanda, Mitos, *Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows* (2011)

A. INTRODUCTION

Signs are an integral part of everyday human life, serving as tools for communication, expression, and understanding. A sign does not directly represent a meaning or moral value; rather, it refers to an abstract concept through a concrete form, such as an object or an action. In semiotics, Ferdinand de Saussure conceptualized signs through a dual structure consisting of the signifier (physical form) and the signified (mental concept), emphasizing that the relationship between the two is arbitrary and culturally constructed (Saussure, 2011).

Signs are widely used in literary works, including films, to convey deeper meanings, critiques, and messages that may not be explicitly expressed. These signs can appear as characters, objects, events, or settings, reflecting social, cultural, and political realities. Symbolic analysis can be effectively conducted through semiotics, particularly the framework proposed by Roland Barthes, which distinguishes between denotation (literal meaning) and connotation (meaning influenced by culture and ideology) (Barthes, 1972). This approach reveals how signs not only function at the surface level but also contain deeper ideological meanings known as myths. As Fachrezy and Nafsika (2025) note, Barthes' semiotic approach reinforces how visual elements in signs represent cultural, ideological, and internal conflict in a narrative.

By applying Roland Barthes' theory of semiotics, this study analyzes how signs in the film *Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows* (2011) convey deeper meanings beyond the plot. Elements such as maps, war events, and games of chess are examined as signs that reflect the strategic and philosophical aspects of human conflict. Previous research has widely and extensively applied Barthes' theory in different cinematic contexts to understand how signs construct meaning in modern media and literature (Dianiya, 2020; Putri et al., 2022; Sembiring et al., 2022). Building on this foundation, recent studies with similar analytical frameworks have consistently utilized semiotic approaches to decode deep meaning, character motivations, and cultural myths within narrative-driven cinema (Astari & Alamsyah, 2024; Fauzi & Alamsyah, 2026). These studies collectively illustrate how mundane character actions and visual signs in films often hide layered ideological meanings that parallel the themes of authority and control explored in this research (Barus et al., 2025; Siregar, 2022). However, while this vast body of research primarily focuses on identifying the meanings of individual signs related to social class, moral messages, and personal discovery, they do not fully explore how mundane objects and strategic events are elevated into ideological myths of intellectual dominance and systemic control. Therefore, this study fills that gap by analyzing the signs in *Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows* (2011) as an interconnected system representing deeper aspects of modern rationality and authority, thereby providing a more comprehensive semiotic interpretation. Furthermore, semiotic frameworks have been successfully applied to analyze the underlying messages in visual media beyond standard narratives (Syakur et al., 2018; Wijayanto & Iswari, 2021). These studies emphasize that even commercial or short-form media function as systems of signification that mirror broader societal values.

B. LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Film as Literary Work

The expansion of literary work beyond traditional print media necessitates a consideration of film's position within this evolving definition. Film is a complex medium that combines moving images and audio to tell a story, necessitating a consideration of its position within evolving literary definitions. Klarer (2004) argues for recognizing film as a "performing art" with

inherent similarities to drama. Furthermore, film employs numerous literary techniques, including established narrative structures, complex character development, and the use of symbolism and metaphor to explore thematic depth.

2. Semiotics

Semiotics provides a strong perspective for examining film and understanding how meaning is constructed within the cinematic experience. As Chandler (2007) notes, semiotics is concerned with "everything that can be taken as a sign," spanning a wide range of communicative elements from words and images to sounds and gestures. Saussure (2011) laid the essential groundwork for this field by defining the sign as a dual entity composed of a signifier (the physical form) and a signified (the mental concept). He argued that the relationship between these two components is arbitrary and based on social convention rather than inherent connection. This foundational principle is critical for film analysis, as it suggests that cinematic elements acquire meaning not through intrinsic properties, but through their function within a system of shared cultural codes. By analyzing these codes, semiotics allows us to decode the visual and auditory tapestry of the cinematic text, revealing how various elements function as signs to convey meaning to the audience. Recent semiotic inquiries have further demonstrated the flexibility of Barthes' framework in analyzing diverse cinematic elements, from animation to psychological motifs (Kirana & Indarti, 2025; Lestari, 2023). Such research confirms that denotation and connotation serve as vital tools for exposing the ideological structures embedded within modern visual texts (Dewayani & Azwar, 2024).

3. Roland Barthes' Semiotic Theory

Barthes expanded upon the linguistic theories of Saussure. He applied this idea beyond language to analyze various cultural phenomena. Barthes extends Saussure's concept of the sign by introducing the idea of connotation, which refers to the cultural or symbolic meanings associated with signs beyond their literal definitions, or denotation (Barthes, 1972). In his later works, particularly *S/Z* (1970) and *Camera Lucida* (1980), Barthes emphasized that literary texts and visual media rarely have a single meaning; rather, they contain several messages that actively position the viewer to perceive underlying cultural beliefs. Thus, Barthes used the term "myth" to describe how these multiple connotative meanings are naturalized in order to create and reinforce dominant ideologies.

C. METHOD

This research employed a descriptive qualitative method. The researcher used a semiotic approach to analyze the meaning behind certain scenes in the film. The film *Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows* (2011) serves as the data source. The specific scenes were purposefully selected based on their narrative centrality and their high density of symbolic objects related to the theme of intellectual dominance and systemic control. In this study, the unit of analysis was the specific scene, focusing on the prominent objects and character interactions within it. In practice, the analytical procedure began by identifying the physical signifiers (objects or actions) within the selected scene to determine their literal meaning as the denotative level. Following this, the researcher distinguished the connotative level by analyzing the cultural, psychological, and ideological associations of these exact signs within the context of the film's narrative. The researcher used the observation method to collect data, which involves gathering data using one's

senses in a systematic and meaningful manner. According to Miles and Huberman (2014), qualitative data analysis consists of several steps including data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. The researcher categorizes the data according to the signifier, signified, connotation, denotation, and myth.

D. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the observations, the visual elements and events in *Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows* (2011) operate across three levels of signification.

1. Red Strings Map

Table 1. “Red Strings Map” Signification

1. Signifier Map 	2. Signified A picture that shows where countries, towns, roads, etc. are
3. Sign I. SIGNIFIER The visual of Holmes revealing his investigative board connecting assassinations and bombings to Moriarty	II. SIGNIFIED The transformation of chaotic information into a navigable structure
III. SIGN Knowledge	

Source: *Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows* (Ritchie, 2011, 00:15:12)

Denotatively, the scene shows Watson discovering Holmes' massive wall map covered in photographs of people and newspaper clippings about recent assassinations and bombings, all physically connected by a web of red strings leading to Moriarty. At the connotative level, the map acts as a sign for the mind's ability to design a logical solution to an unpredictable problem. The red threads signify that Holmes possesses a psychological need to turn human tragedy into calculated data points. On a myth level, the map represents the myth of Knowledge. The red strings conceptually mirror the Greek myth of Ariadne's Thread, representing intellectual navigation used to find one's way through a labyrinth of conspiracy. This naturalizes the modern belief that complex global systems can be mastered by a superior intellect, visually representing what Fuller and Weizman (2021) call "investigative aesthetics."

2. War

Table 2. “War” Signification

1. Signifier War 	2. Signified A fighting, using soldiers and weapons, between two or more countries, or two or more groups inside a country
3. Sign I. SIGNIFIER The orchestration of terror and assassinations to provoke a global conflict between France and Germany	II. SIGNIFIED The commodification of conflict and the fragility of political peace as an illusion for corporate profit
III. SIGN Industrialization	

Source: Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows (Ritchie, 2011, 01:18:32)

Denotatively, the film presents a series of terror attacks orchestrated by Moriarty, including public bombings and political manipulation, designed to provoke a world war. At the connotative level, the escalation of war acts as a sign for the commodification of human conflict. War in the narrative is no longer a matter of national honor because it has become a calculated commercial product. Moriarty's actions reveal the psychological detachment required to play a global mind-game. On a myth level, this scene depicts the myth of Industrialization. Within this myth, human conflict is no longer viewed as a moral struggle but is instead transformed into a mechanized and mass-produced industry. This perfectly aligns with the concept of "militarized accumulation" discussed by Robinson (2014), where global capitalism treats warfare primarily as an economic strategy to generate corporate profit.

3. Chess

Table 3. “Chess” Signification

1. Signifier Chess 	2. Signified A game that two people play by moving different pieces around a board of black and white squares
3. Sign	

I. SIGNIFIER Holmes and Moriarty playing a tense chess match where pieces represent their allies	II. SIGNIFIED The conflict as a "grand game" where human loyalty and connection are sacrificed for a strategic objective
III. SIGN Control	

Source: *Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows* (Ritchie, 2011, 01:44:52)

Denotatively, the characters engage in a high-stakes blindfold chess match on an outdoor balcony, calling out their moves verbally, with a literal personification of their pieces indicating the people on their respective sides. At the connotative level, the chess match represents the cold, calculating nature of strategic detachment. The intense setting visually conveys the emotional distance the characters must maintain with their allies, who are explicitly reduced to expendable pieces on a board. This connotes a reality where human loyalty is sacrificed for the objective. On a myth level, this scene reinforces the myth of Control, where individual life is less important than the success of the mission. Mastering the game becomes a symbol of the cold reality of strategic supremacy. This reflects the arguments of Taufani et al. (2025), who observe how chessboard metaphors describe how political actors execute their strategies, managing global systems by maneuvering regular individuals merely as pawns.

Furthermore, the three myths are logically connected. The myth of knowledge (the map) symbolizes the cognitive ability to decipher complex systems. However, intellect is insufficient to win the conflict. To acquire control (the chess match), this knowledge must be put into action. This is how the myth of Industrialization (the orchestration of war) bridges the gap. Moriarty employs warfare as a practical instrument to transform his abstract plans into tangible power. As a result, industrialization acts as a practical bridge between intellectual planning (knowledge) and the ultimate outcome of the conflict (control).

E. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that *Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows* (2011) shows a representation of intellectual dominance and systemic control through the use of signs that work consistently at three levels of meaning. Signs such as the red strings map, the orchestration of war, and the chess match serve not only as functional narrative elements but also as constructions of meaning that describe the psychological and strategic journey of the protagonist. This semiotic representation directs the research to the core theme of the victory of rationality, observation, and strategic foresight over manufactured chaos. The results of this study provide theoretical contributions by affirming the relevance of Barthes' theory to the reading of mystery narratives, while guiding audiences to understand the ideological structures hidden within modern cinema.

However, this study is limited by its narrow focus on three primary visual metaphors and its reliance on a singular semiotic framework, which may not capture the full complexity of the film's auditory and dynamic cinematic elements. Future research should consider employing multimodality approaches to provide a more comprehensive analysis of character motivations and the connections between sound, dialogue, and visual signs in the film.

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