

## **DENOTATIVE AND CONNOTATIVE MEANINGS IN THE TRUMAN SHOW: A SEMIOTICS ANALYSIS BASED ON ROLAND BARTHES' THEORY**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This research discusses the denotative and connotative meanings found in the film *The Truman Show* (1998), directed by Peter Weir. The story tells about a man named Truman Burbank who lives in a world that he believes is real, but actually everything around him is a television show created by a production team. This film is full of signs that can be analyzed using semiotic theory. The aim of this study is to analyze the signs in the film based on Roland Barthes' semiotic theory, especially his idea about two levels of meaning: denotation (the literal meaning) and connotation (the hidden or cultural meaning). This research uses a qualitative method by observing important scenes and objects in the film, such as the ocean, the hidden cameras, the artificial sun, and Truman's daily routines. The result shows that many of the signs in the film have deeper meanings. For example, the ocean doesn't only mean water or a barrier, but also represents Truman's fear and how the media controls him. The hidden cameras show how Truman is always being watched, which can be seen as a sign of surveillance in modern society. These signs help us understand how the film talks about freedom, control, and reality. *The Truman Show* is a good example of a film that can be analyzed using semiotics. It shows how media can shape reality and control people's lives. Using Barthes' theory helps us to see the deeper meanings behind simple objects and actions in the film.

**Keywords:** Connotative, Denotative, Semiotics, *The Truman Show*

### **INTRODUCTION**

In today's digital age, people are constantly surrounded by media. From television and advertisements to movies and social media, media has a strong influence on how people think, behave, and see the world around them. One of the most powerful forms of media is film. A film is not only a form of entertainment, but also a medium that can express messages, values, and ideologies through stories and visuals. These messages are often hidden and communicated through signs and symbols. For this reason, film can be studied as a text that carries deeper meaning.

One film that is interesting to study in this way is *The Truman Show* (1998), directed by Peter Weir. The film tells the story of Truman Burbank, a man who has unknowingly lived his entire life inside a television show. Everyone around him is an actor, and every part of his environment is carefully controlled by the producers. Truman believes that his life is real, but in fact, it is completely fake. The film explores important

themes such as reality, identity, control, and freedom. Because of its rich use of symbols and signs, *The Truman Show* is a suitable object for a semiotic analysis.

This study uses the semiotic theory of Roland Barthes to understand the meanings behind the signs in the film. According to Barthes (1972), a sign has two levels of meaning: denotation and connotation. Denotation refers to the literal or basic meaning of a sign, while connotation refers to the cultural, emotional, or symbolic meaning that is associated with it. For example, in the film, the ocean can be seen as water (denotation), but it can also represent fear, isolation, or a barrier to freedom (connotation). Barthes' theory helps us to look deeper into the meanings that are not immediately visible.

Many researchers have applied semiotic theory to various forms of media, including advertisements, music lyrics, and film posters. For example, Aryani, Saleha, and Yuwita (2023) analyzed traffic signs using Peirce's semiotic approach to understand how signs convey warnings in a social context. Similarly, Jakautama and Bustam (2022) explored the denotative and connotative meanings in song lyrics to reveal how emotions are constructed through language. In visual media, Juliantari (2014) and Octavia and Sujana (2022) studied movie posters using semiotic analysis, showing how signs are used to attract audiences and deliver hidden messages. Rezeki and Sagala (2023) also emphasized that even a single image in a movie poster can contain complex signs that reflect deeper ideological meanings.

Meanwhile, Sinaga (2022) used a semiotic approach to interpret public health messages in a COVID-19 vaccine campaign, highlighting how symbols can foster emotional connection and influence public perception. Puspita and Tustiwati (2023) analyzed brand philosophy through symbolic images, emphasizing the importance of cultural and emotional codes. These various studies demonstrate that semiotic analysis is a flexible and useful method for interpreting meaning across different forms of media.

Other researchers have also studied how signs can be used to deliver messages in media. For example, Kamil & Juanda (2021) in his article "The Meaning of Symbols in Bear Brand Milk Advertisements" published in *Mahadaya: Jurnal Bahasa, Sastra, dan Budaya*, showed how visual signs in advertisements can represent ideas like purity and health. Even though the object of Kamil & Juanda's research was an advertisement, the method of reading signs and identifying their meanings can also be used in film analysis. This shows that semiotic analysis is a flexible and useful method for understanding how media communicates ideas.

In Indonesia, there are still not many academic studies by students that analyze English-language films using semiotics, especially using Barthes' theory. Most student research focuses on character analysis, plot, or social themes. This study hopes to contribute to the field of English literature by offering a different approach: reading film as a system of signs. By analyzing the signs in *The Truman Show*, this research aims to show how the film communicates important ideas about media, reality, and personal freedom through both denotative and connotative meanings.

The purpose of this research is to identify and analyze the denotative and connotative meanings of selected signs in *The Truman Show* using Roland Barthes' semiotic theory. The study will focus on symbols that appear repeatedly in the film, such as the ocean, the dome, the camera, and the character of Christof, to understand how these signs reflect the film's deeper messages. In the end, this study hopes to show that *The Truman Show* is not only a story about one man's life, but also a reflection of the way media can control, shape, and limit human experience.

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**METHODS**

This research applies a qualitative descriptive method, which is commonly used in literary and cultural studies. The main goal of this method is to describe and interpret the meaning of signs found in a text in this case, a film. Qualitative research focuses on words, symbols, and meanings rather than numbers or statistics. It is the most suitable approach for analyzing how a film communicates messages through visual and narrative elements. In this study, *The Truman Show* (1998) is treated as a cultural text that contains various signs, symbols, and codes that can be interpreted using semiotic theory.

The research is based on Roland Barthes' semiotic theory, particularly his concept of denotation and connotation. Barthes (1972) explains that every sign has two levels of meaning. The denotative meaning refers to the literal or obvious meaning of a sign, while the connotative meaning refers to the cultural or symbolic meaning, which is influenced by society, ideology, and individual interpretation. These meanings are not always visible at first glance, but they can be discovered through analysis. For example, in *The Truman Show*, the presence of cameras may denote surveillance, but connotatively, they symbolize the loss of privacy and individual freedom.

The object of this research is the film *The Truman Show*, directed by Peter Weir and released in 1998. The film is rich in symbolic imagery and narrative elements that reflect themes such as media control, reality versus illusion, identity, and resistance. This makes it a strong candidate for semiotic analysis. The film is analyzed as a text that communicates meaning through both audio and visual signs, including setting, character behavior, camera angles, dialogues, and symbolic objects.

The data collection technique used in this study is documentation. The researcher watched the film several times in order to carefully observe the important scenes, events, and visual details. Notes were taken during each viewing session to identify repeated symbols, significant moments, and visually striking elements. These include objects like the ocean, the dome, the sky, hidden cameras, and characters such as Truman and Christof. After identifying these elements, the researcher classified them as signs and analyzed them according to their denotative and connotative meanings.

In addition to the film itself, the researcher also used secondary sources such as journal articles, books on semiotics, and previous research related to film and media studies. One relevant previous study is by Kamil & Juanda (2021), titled "The Meaning of Symbols in Bear Brand Milk Advertisements", published in *Mahadaya: Jurnal Bahasa, Sastra, dan Budaya*. Although the object of Kamil & Juanda's research was an advertisement, it used the same theoretical framework Barthes' semiotics to explore how visual signs deliver ideological messages. This supports the relevance of using semiotics for visual media like film.

The process of analysis was done in several steps. First, each selected symbol was described in terms of its denotative meaning what is literally shown or said in the film. Then, the connotative meaning was interpreted by considering cultural context, narrative function, and ideological implications. The goal was to understand how these signs help communicate the film's deeper messages about media, surveillance, and the construction of reality.

This research does not involve any field research, surveys, or interviews. All data come from close reading and observation of the film, supported by academic sources that help provide context and theory. The result of this research is a detailed interpretation of how signs work in *The Truman Show*, and how the film uses them to create a powerful critique of modern media culture and the illusion of personal freedom.

## RESULTS

This section presents the findings of the semiotic analysis of selected signs in *The Truman Show* using Roland Barthes' theory of denotation and connotation. The signs were chosen based on their symbolic significance in the film and their repeated appearance throughout the story. Each sign is analyzed at two levels: denotative (literal meaning) and connotative (cultural or symbolic meaning) experience, and the human condition with concrete images and narratives. The scope of the analysis is summarized in the table 1:

**Table 1. Sign/Symbol and Denotative, Connotative Meaning**

No	Sign /Symbol	Denotative Meaning	Connotative Meaning
1	The Ocean	A large body of water	A boundary or prison; fear of the unknown; psychological control
2	The Dome / Sky	A visible structure above Truman's world	Artificiality of reality; limits of human experience
3	Hidden Cameras	Surveillance tools	Loss of privacy; manipulation; modern panopticon
4	The Producer (Christof)	A man who controls Truman's life	God-like figure; media power; authority over truth
5	Truman's Boat	A small sailing vessel	Rebellion; freedom; personal journey
6	Seahaven Town	A peaceful, perfect town	Illusion; social construction; false comfort
7	The Stage Lights	Artificial lighting equipment	The exposure of lies; breakdown of illusion
8	The Exit Door	A door at the edge of the dome	Liberation; truth; choice; awareness of reality

## DISCUSSION

In this section, the researcher interprets the findings presented in the previous part. Each selected sign from *The Truman Show* is discussed in more depth by connecting the denotative and connotative meanings with Roland Barthes' semiotic theory. As Barthes (1972) explains, signs in media texts often carry deeper ideological or cultural meanings beyond what is directly shown. Through this analysis, we can understand how *The Truman Show* delivers complex messages about freedom, identity, and the influence of media in modern life.

### 1. The Ocean

In *The Truman Show*, the ocean is a recurring element that plays an important role in Truman's life and decisions. Denotatively, the ocean is just a large body of water surrounding the town of Seahaven. It functions as a natural border that keeps Truman from exploring beyond the town limits. From the beginning of the film, the ocean is presented as something dangerous and frightening. Truman believes that his father died in the ocean during a boating accident, which creates a strong psychological fear in him.

However, connotatively, the ocean carries much deeper symbolic meanings. According to Barthes' theory, this sign can be read as a cultural symbol. In many narratives, the ocean often represents the unknown, freedom, and adventure. But in *The Truman Show*, it is transformed into a tool of control. Truman's fear of the ocean is not natural it is planted in his mind by the show's creators. Therefore, the ocean becomes a symbol of psychological imprisonment, showing how fear can be used by those in power to limit a person's freedom.

Furthermore, the ocean also symbolizes the boundary between reality and illusion. Seahaven is an artificial world, but beyond the ocean lies the real world. By keeping Truman afraid of the ocean, the producers keep him inside the illusion. This reflects the way media can manipulate reality and prevent people from questioning the world they live in.

When Truman finally overcomes his fear and sails across the ocean, it becomes a metaphor for rebellion and enlightenment. His journey through the ocean shows his determination to seek the truth, even if it means leaving behind everything he has known. This aligns with Barthes' idea that signs can reflect ideological resistance. Truman's crossing of the ocean is not only a physical act but also a symbolic journey from oppression to self-awareness.

## **2. The Dome and the Artificial Sky**

Another powerful symbol in *The Truman Show* is the dome that encloses the town of Seahaven and the artificial sky painted on its interior. Denotatively, the dome is simply a massive structure that covers the entire filming set. It contains an artificial sky, complete with simulated weather and lighting, which makes the town look like a normal place. To Truman and the other "citizens," this sky appears real and limitless, just like the real world.

However, from a connotative perspective, the dome and the fake sky represent the limits of constructed reality. According to Roland Barthes' semiotic theory, signs like this may look natural on the surface but actually carry deep ideological meanings. The dome is a symbol of how media and systems of power construct boundaries, not just physically but also mentally and ideologically. Truman's entire worldview is shaped by what is shown to him. The artificial sky becomes a metaphor for the illusion of freedom he believes he is free, while in fact, every part of his environment is designed to keep him inside.

Moreover, the sky usually symbolizes hope, divinity, or limitlessness in many cultural and literary traditions. But in this film, it is inverted it symbolizes limitation, artificiality, and false reality. This inversion shows how dominant media powers can manipulate traditional symbols to control perception. Barthes (1972) notes that cultural codes can be masked as "natural" through myth; in this case, the natural sky becomes a manufactured myth of reality.

A key moment is when Truman touches the "sky" at the end of the film and discovers it is just a wall. This moment marks a semiotic rupture, where the sign breaks and its hidden meaning is exposed. The boundary that once represented a comforting sky is revealed as a physical barrier to truth, pushing Truman and the audience to question how much of what we believe to be "real" is actually constructed.

Thus, the dome and sky in *The Truman Show* are not just set designs; they are semiotic symbols of ideological confinement, reflecting how institutions (like media,

government, or religion) can shape human perception by defining what is seen and what is hidden.

### **3. Hidden Cameras**

One of the most dominant elements in *The Truman Show* is the hidden camera. These devices are placed all around Seahaven inside household items, cars, buttons, and even in the eyes of people Truman interacts with. Denotatively, they are simply tools used to record Truman's life from every angle. These cameras are essential for the show's production and help create the illusion of a real world for the viewers watching Truman's life on television.

Connotatively, however, the hidden cameras serve as a powerful symbol of surveillance, manipulation, and the loss of privacy. In Barthes' semiotic theory, signs may carry ideological meanings depending on how they are used in context. In this case, the cameras signify the panopticon a concept developed by philosopher Michel Foucault, which refers to a system where people are constantly watched without their knowledge, leading them to control themselves out of fear of being observed. In *The Truman Show*, Truman does not know he is being watched, yet his entire life is structured by the fact that others are always observing him.

This creates a connotative message about the modern surveillance society, where people's actions, thoughts, and behaviors are influenced or limited because they know they are being monitored by governments, corporations, or even social media. The cameras in Truman's world are symbols of how media can invade private space, and how reality TV can normalize the idea of watching others for entertainment.

Furthermore, the cameras show the power imbalance between those who control the media and those who are unknowingly controlled by it. Truman is the subject of entertainment, but he has no say in how his life is shown. The audience watches without guilt, and the producers manipulate every aspect of his world. This reflects Barthes' idea that connotative meanings often support dominant ideologies in this case, the belief that entertainment justifies invasion of privacy.

A turning point in the film occurs when Truman begins to notice inconsistencies, like a camera hidden in a mirror or the strange behavior of people around him. These moments show a semiotic awakening he starts to interpret the signs around him and realize they are not neutral. This aligns with the idea that once people become aware of the signs and their meanings; they can begin to resist the systems that control them.

The hidden cameras in *The Truman Show* are more than just filming devices. They symbolize the silent mechanisms of control in modern society and challenge viewers to reflect on how much of their own lives are being watched, shaped, and influenced by unseen forces.

### **4. The Producer (Christof)**

Another important symbol in *The Truman Show* is Christof, the creator and executive producer of the reality show that documents Truman's life. Denotatively, Christof is a television producer who manages the show and makes all creative decisions. He gives instructions to the crew, controls the environment, and determines how Truman's life unfolds.

However, connotatively, Christof represents much more than just a producer. From a semiotic perspective, and following Barthes' theory, Christof is a signifier of

authority, control, and even divinity. His name Christof resembles “Christ,” which suggests a symbolic link to God or a god-like figure. In this sense, Christof can be seen as the symbol of a creator figure, one who decides what is real and what is not for Truman. He controls not only Truman’s surroundings but also the information that Truman receives, which mirrors how institutions in real life such as media, religion, or government can shape people’s perception of reality.

Christof’s behavior also reflects the ideological power of media. He believes that keeping Truman inside the dome is for Truman’s own good, and even says, “We accept the reality of the world with which we are presented.” This line reveals the media’s ability to construct “truth”, and how people can be led to believe something is real just because it is consistently presented to them. According to Barthes, this kind of repetition and framing turns constructed messages into myths, making them appear natural and unquestionable.

Moreover, Christof’s control over Truman’s life represents the loss of individual agency in the face of powerful media systems. Truman does not get to make genuine choices because his environment and relationships are all staged. Christof justifies his control by claiming to love Truman and wanting to protect him. This shows how control can be disguised as care, and how power can hide behind the mask of protection or entertainment.

In semiotic terms, Christof stands for ideological dominance the belief that certain authorities have the right to define what is best for others. Truman’s eventual rejection of Christof’s control symbolizes a resistance to this dominance and a reclaiming of personal truth and freedom.

Christof is not just a character; he is a semiotic representation of the modern creator-tyrant, who manipulates reality under the justification of benevolence. His presence invites viewers to question who creates the “truth” in their own lives and whether that truth is truly theirs.

## **5. Truman’s Boat**

The boat that Truman uses to escape from Seahaven becomes one of the most symbolic objects in *The Truman Show*. Denotatively, the boat is a simple sailing vessel. It appears during the climax of the film, when Truman decides to leave the town by sailing across the ocean, despite his deep fear of water.

Connotatively, however, Truman’s boat is a powerful symbol of freedom, resistance, and personal transformation. In semiotic terms, the boat functions as a signifier of agency the ability to make one’s own decisions and break away from imposed systems. It is the first time Truman truly takes control of his own life. After years of being manipulated, the boat becomes a tool for self-liberation.

According to Barthes, a sign’s meaning depends on cultural and ideological context. In many cultures and narratives, boats are used to symbolize journeys, discovery, and the search for truth. In this film, the boat carries Truman not only across water, but toward knowledge and self-awareness. It represents a passage from ignorance to enlightenment, from being a passive subject of the media to becoming an active seeker of reality.

Moreover, the act of sailing the boat is a direct act of resistance. Truman is defying the rules of the world created for him by Christof and the production team. His decision to face the ocean, despite his childhood trauma and fear, shows his inner strength and determination. This moment aligns with Barthes’ idea that signs can be reinterpreted by

individuals to challenge dominant myths. The ocean, once a symbol of fear and imprisonment, is redefined by Truman through his own action. He no longer accepts the meaning imposed by others he reclaims it.

The storm scene, where Christof tries to stop Truman by creating dangerous weather, also adds to the symbolism. The boat's struggle against the storm represents Truman's struggle against external control and oppression. Yet, Truman survives and continues. His journey affirms the idea that truth is worth risking everything for, and that freedom often comes with struggle.

The boat in *The Truman Show* is not just a means of transportation. It is a semiotic key to understanding Truman's transformation. It stands for courage, independence, and the power of the individual to define reality for themselves core themes that resonate deeply in the modern era of media control.

## **6. Seahaven Town**

Seahaven, the town where Truman has lived his entire life, is another key symbol in *The Truman Show*. Denotatively, it is a clean, peaceful, and ideal American suburban town. It has friendly neighbors, well-kept houses, daily routines, and cheerful music. Everything looks perfect, safe, and comfortable.

But connotatively, Seahaven is a carefully designed illusion. From a semiotic point of view, Seahaven represents the myth of a perfect society. According to Roland Barthes, myths are dominant cultural messages that seem natural, but are actually constructed. Seahaven symbolizes a controlled reality where everything is planned and nothing unexpected happens. It reflects the way media and culture can present artificial environments as ideal and desirable.

Seahaven also functions as a prison disguised as paradise. While it appears beautiful on the surface, it actually traps Truman within a lie. His environment is fake, his relationships are staged, and his freedom is limited. This contrast between appearance and reality is central to Barthes' theory of connotation. The town is a symbol of how systems of power such as media corporations or governments can create environments that discourage critical thinking and promote passive acceptance.

In addition, Seahaven promotes conformity. Everyone acts according to a script. Any form of difference or unpredictability is removed. This reflects the ideological message that people should follow societal expectations without question. Truman, however, begins to notice that everything is too perfect, too repetitive. This semiotic disturbance causes him to question the truth behind the signs in his life.

The town's name itself Seahaven is symbolic. It combines "sea" (which in the film symbolizes boundary and fear) and "haven" (meaning a safe place). This contradiction reflects the deeper meaning of the town: it is presented as a haven, but in truth, it is a cage.

Seahaven is more than just a setting it is a symbol of illusion, control, and ideological manipulation. It invites the viewer to question whether the world they live in, with its rules and routines, is as real and free as it seems.

## **7. The Stage Light**

At the beginning of *The Truman Show*, a stage light labeled "Sirius" falls from the sky and crashes onto the street near Truman. Denotatively, this is just a stage light



equipment used in film and television production to create artificial lighting. Its fall seems like an accident, and Truman is confused by it.

Connotatively, however, the falling light serves as a powerful symbol of truth, disruption, and exposure. In semiotic terms, it is the first sign of a crack in the illusion that surrounds Truman. According to Barthes (1972), signs can function as cultural codes, and when those codes break or malfunction, their constructed nature becomes visible. The stage light breaking off symbolizes the beginning of Truman's awakening his first direct encounter with the idea that his world might be fake.

The fact that the light is labeled "Sirius" is also symbolically important. Sirius is the brightest star in the night sky, often called the "Dog Star." In various mythologies, it has been associated with truth, guidance, and divine signs. So, the name itself adds to the connotation: it hints that this moment is a signal, a celestial clue pushing Truman toward the truth.

From a broader perspective, the falling stage light represents the failure of the system. It shows that even the most carefully constructed lies are not perfect and can be exposed. This aligns with Barthes' notion that myths (or ideologies) can be deconstructed when signs no longer function smoothly. For Truman, this event is a symbolic turning point his perception begins to shift, and he starts to become more suspicious of his environment.

Furthermore, the light falling from the sky disrupts the illusion of the sky itself. The sky, which Truman has always believed to be vast and natural, is suddenly revealed to be artificial and fragile. This creates a semiotic rupture, where the sign (the sky) is stripped of its original meaning and exposed as a constructed surface.

The stage light in *The Truman Show* is not just a piece of technical equipment it is a semiotic trigger, a symbolic device that begins Truman's journey toward self-awareness. It reminds the audience that even the most polished illusions can break, and that truth often begins with small, accidental signs.

## **8. The Exit Door**

The final and most powerful symbol in *The Truman Show* is the exit door that Truman finds at the edge of the dome. After sailing across the artificial sea and reaching the wall that marks the end of his world, Truman discovers a staircase leading to a dark door. Denotatively, it is simply an exit an emergency door that leads out of the film set.

Connotatively, however, the exit door represents freedom, truth, and self-determination. It is the physical boundary between illusion and reality, between Truman's constructed life and the unknown world beyond. According to Roland Barthes' semiotic theory, signs often appear natural but carry ideological meaning. The door here becomes a signifier of liberation, but also of uncertainty and personal responsibility.

The moment Truman stands before the door is filled with symbolic weight. Christof tries to persuade him to stay, claiming that the world outside is just as full of lies and pain. But Truman's choice to walk through the door shows his decision to reject comfort, control, and falsehood in favor of autonomy. This is a classic example of semiotic resistance the moment when an individual rejects dominant ideological signs and creates new meaning for themselves.

The contrast between the bright, staged world of Seahaven and the dark, unknown space beyond the door highlights a key theme in semiotics: that truth is not always visible or easy. Often, it must be chosen, even when it means stepping into darkness. The door

also echoes mythic and religious symbols the threshold to a new reality, similar to Plato's allegory of the cave, where the character leaves the shadow world to find the real sun.

In cultural codes, a door can symbolize both endings and beginnings. For Truman, it marks the end of surveillance, control, and illusion. But it also signifies the start of a new life one where he can define reality for himself. The exit door is therefore a semiotic climax, tying together all the film's themes: control, media, truth, illusion, and freedom.

## CONCLUSION

The Truman Show is more than just a science-fiction drama; it is a rich text full of symbolic signs that reflect important issues in modern society. Through a semiotic analysis using Roland Barthes' theory, this study reveals how objects, characters, and settings in the film carry deeper meanings beyond their literal functions.

The eight symbols analyzed Truman himself, the dome, hidden cameras, Christof, the boat, Seahaven town, the stage light, and the exit door represent various concepts such as control, surveillance, freedom, truth, and ideological manipulation. These signs work together to construct a narrative about how reality can be shaped by powerful forces, especially the media, and how individuals must struggle to discover their own truth.

The connotative meanings behind these symbols show that The Truman Show is not just about one man's escape from a fake world, but a metaphor for all people living under social and media pressures. As Barthes argued, signs are never neutral they are part of cultural systems that often serve dominant ideologies. Truman's journey is a form of resistance, a decision to reject the myth he has lived in and pursue his own meaning.

This study also connects with previous research, such as Kamil & Juanda (2021) in *Jurnal Mahadaya*, which emphasizes that even in commercial media like advertisements, symbols can reflect power structures and hidden intentions. Likewise, The Truman Show uses entertainment to deliver a serious message about human freedom and identity in the media age.

By applying semiotic analysis, we can better understand how films like The Truman Show communicate complex ideas through signs. This approach encourages viewers to become more critical and aware of the symbols in their own lives and to ask whether the world they know is truly real or simply constructed.

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