Dharmawangsa: International Journals of The Social Science, Education and Humanities ISSN: 2716-5132 (p) Vol. 1, No. 2, 2020 Page: 294-303

Representation of the Father's Silent Treatment in the Film Dear Nathan: A Roland Barthes Semiotic Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the representation of the father's silent treatment in the film Dear Nathan, as well as to reveal the meanings constructed through this communication pattern. The research employs a qualitative method with a semiotic analysis approach. The analysis is based on the framework of denotation, connotation, and myth to interpret selected scenes that depict interactions between Nathan and his father. Data were collected through documentation techniques by repeatedly watching and observing relevant scenes, as well as identifying visual signs, verbal expressions, and cinematographic elements that represent silence as a form of communication. The analysis focuses on how these signs construct meaning within the narrative of the film. The results show that the father's silent treatment is not merely an act of remaining silent or refusing to speak, but contains symbolic meanings such as emotional distance, authority, disappointment, and control within the family structure. At the level of myth, the film reflects and simultaneously reproduces an ideology that portrays the father as a firm figure with minimal emotional expression. This study concludes that film plays a role in constructing and naturalizing certain patterns of family communication while also opening space for critical reflection on their emotional impact.

Keywords: film analysis, father figure, masculinity, representation, semiotics, silent treatment.

INTRODUCTION

The development of the media industry, particularly film, has influenced the way society understands social relationships and family dynamics. Film functions not only as entertainment but also as a space for the production of meaning that shapes perceptions of roles, authority, and emotional expression in domestic life. In the context of interpersonal communication, nonverbal actions play an important role in the construction of meaning. It has been stated that nonverbal communication is a form of message delivery without words that still carries meaning in interpersonal interaction (Napitupulu, 2023, 3). Therefore, silence in film cannot be understood as the absence of communication, but rather as a form of message that contains certain significance. In this regard, silence may function as a symbolic language that conveys emotional tension, disappointment, or rejection without the need for verbal expression, making it an important element in interpreting character relationships within cinematic narratives.

In many representations, fathers are often portrayed as firm and authoritative figures who tend to restrain emotional expression. One form of communication that frequently appears in father child relationships is the silent treatment. Previous studies indicate that the silent treatment is often used as a strategy to avoid direct confrontation when individuals are unable to express anger openly (Hasna, 2025, 124). This suggests that silence can function as a defensive mechanism in conflict situations. Within narrative representations, such behavior may also illustrate the difficulty of expressing emotions directly, particularly in relationships shaped by expectations of authority and control.

The impact of the silent treatment also cannot be ignored. It has been noted that the silent treatment may cause feelings of being ignored and unappreciated in the person who receives it (Irawati, 2025, 6). In family relationships, this condition has the potential to create

emotional distance between fathers and their children. Moreover, in hierarchical relationships, silence can contain a dimension of power, as emphasized by the argument that within hierarchical relations, silence may function as a form of symbolic control and the assertion of authority (Faza, 2022, 59). In this sense, silence is not merely a passive action but may represent a communicative strategy that reinforces relational hierarchy and emotional boundaries within the family structure.

From the perspective of media studies, such communication practices do not appear in a neutral form. Representations presented in films play an active role in constructing social reality. This aligns with the view that media representation does not merely reflect reality but also constructs and naturalizes certain values within society (Huda et al., 2023, 10). Therefore, the portrayal of a father who chooses silence in film can be understood as a construction of particular values related to authority and masculinity. Through cinematic storytelling, these representations may gradually shape audience perceptions regarding how fathers are expected to behave within family dynamics.

This construction is reinforced by cultural perspectives that position the father as a rational figure with minimal emotional expression. It has been stated that the father figure in patriarchal culture is often constructed as a firm individual who expresses little emotional expression (Annisa Anindya, 20218, 25). This representation can be observed in the film Dear Nathan, where the relationship between Nathan and his father is depicted as emotionally distant through limited and rather cold communication. Such portrayals highlight how silence can function as a narrative device that reflects unresolved emotional tensions between family members.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The film industry, as part of popular culture, holds a strategic position in shaping public perspectives on social practices, including patterns of family communication. Meaning in film is constructed through various interconnected systems of signs. As explained, the meaning of signs in film is formed through the combination of visual elements, dialogue, and the social context surrounding them (Huda et al., 2023, 12). Therefore, the analysis of facial expressions, gestures, lighting, and shot composition becomes important in understanding the representation of the silent treatment. These cinematic elements function not only as aesthetic components but also as communicative signs that help audiences interpret emotional situations and relational dynamics between characters.

In family dynamics, the silent treatment is understood as a complex form of nonverbal communication. At the ideological level, media plays a role in instilling certain values in audiences. This is emphasized by the statement that at the level of myth, media functions to reproduce ideologies that are perceived as natural and taken for granted within society (Juliant, 2024, 2708). Thus, the representation of a silent father may construct a myth of masculinity characterized by rationality, firmness, and emotional restraint. Such representations often shape how audiences perceive paternal authority and emotional expression within family relationships.

As noted in previous studies, some research highlights the psychological impact of the silent treatment, such as the emergence of feelings of being ignored and unappreciated.

Meanwhile, other studies explain that silent behavior is often used to avoid direct confrontation when individuals find it difficult to express anger openly (Safitri et al., 2024, 167). This indicates that silence may function as a communicative strategy that reflects emotional tension within interpersonal relationships. On the other hand, research also shows that in certain contexts, silence can be used as a therapeutic strategy of control (Marta Pastari et al., 2025, 157). These different perspectives demonstrate that silence may carry multiple meanings depending on the intentions and relational context in which it occurs.

In the perspective of media representation, it is further emphasized that film as a medium plays a role in shaping and transforming human perspectives on humanitarian principles (Huda et al., 2023, 10). Through narrative construction and visual storytelling, films are able to present social realities and emotional conflicts in ways that encourage audiences to interpret and reflect on interpersonal relationships. Consequently, the portrayal of silence in film narratives can function as a symbolic representation of emotional distance, authority, or unresolved conflict within the family.

These differing findings indicate that the meaning of the silent treatment greatly depends on the context of relationships and the power structures surrounding it, as well as how the media represents it. Therefore, examining the representation of the silent treatment in film becomes important in understanding how media narratives construct meanings related to family relationships, emotional communication, and cultural expectations toward parental roles.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative approach with a semiotic analysis method to examine the representation of the father's silent treatment in the film Dear Nathan. A qualitative approach is chosen because this research focuses on the interpretation of signs, symbols, and the construction of meaning that emerge within film scenes, rather than on quantitative measurement. Qualitative research seeks to understand social phenomena in depth through the interpretation of context, symbols, and the relationships of meaning constructed within media texts.

The analytical method used in this study is semiotics, as film is an audio-visual text composed of interconnected systems of signs. Semiotic analysis is defined as the study of signs or everything related to them, including how they function, their relationships with other signs, and how they are transmitted and interpreted by those who use them (Riki Chandra et al., 2021). This statement emphasizes that semiotics does not merely view signs as symbols, but also as systems of meaning that operate within the process of communication.

This study applies the semiotic model of Roland Barthes, which divides the process of meaning-making into three levels: denotation, connotation, and myth. At the denotative level, the analysis focuses on the literal meaning or what is directly visible in the scene, such as the act of silence, the father's facial expressions, or the lack of verbal interaction. At the connotative level, the act of silence is interpreted as a symbol of disappointment, control, emotional distance, and authority within the family relationship. Meanwhile, at the level of

myth, the analysis aims to examine how such representations construct ideologies related to masculinity and the father figure within the social structure.

Data collection techniques were conducted through documentation by repeatedly watching the film, identifying scenes that display the practice of silent treatment, transcribing relevant dialogues, and examining visual elements that contribute to the formation of meaning. The data used consist of primary data in the form of the film being analyzed, as well as secondary data in the form of literature and scholarly journals relevant to semiotic studies and representation in film.

The data analysis process was carried out through several stages, including the identification of signs, the categorization of meanings, interpretation based on the theoretical framework, and the systematic formulation of conclusions. Through this method, the study aims to reveal how the father's silence in the film is not merely the absence of verbal communication, but rather a constructed sign that represents power relations, emotional control, and the dynamics of masculinity within the family.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Roland Barthes' semiotic theory explains how meaning is produced through three levels of signification: denotation, connotation, and myth. These three levels can be applied to analyze media texts, including the film Dear Nathan. At the denotative level, the analysis focuses on elements that are directly visible in a scene, such as the father's facial expressions, the physical distance between father and child, limited dialogue, and gestures that reflect silence. These elements represent the surface meaning presented to the audience. At the connotative level, the father's silence can be interpreted as more than the absence of speech. It may symbolize emotional distance, disappointment, authority, and a form of control within the father–child relationship. Silence therefore functions as a communicative expression that implicitly conveys the father's feelings and position within the family structure.

At the level of myth, the representation of silent treatment reflects a broader cultural ideology about the role of fathers. The father is portrayed as a firm and rational figure who tends to restrain emotional expression, which is closely related to traditional constructions of masculinity in family life. Through Barthes' semiotic framework, the film can thus be understood not only as a narrative story but also as a system of signs that carries wider social meanings. The depiction of silence in the relationship between father and child illustrates how authority, emotional control, and masculinity are culturally constructed within family interactions. In this context, semiotic analysis allows researchers to explore how visual elements, character behavior, and cinematic composition shape the audience's interpretation of family communication patterns presented in the film.

Figure 1

Resource : Bstation

Denotation

This scene shows Nathan and Salma attending their grandmother's birthday celebration, which is attended by the entire family, including Nathan's father and his new wife. When Nathan sees his father arriving at the event, he asks Salma to leave the celebration. At that moment, Nathan's father intends to communicate with him, but his new wife instructs him not to do so at that time and suggests speaking with Nathan later.

Connotation

At the connotative level, this scene illustrates Nathan's deep disappointment toward his father, who left him and his family without proper communication. Nathan's decision to leave the event reflects the emotional distance and unresolved resentment he feels. Meanwhile, the father's compliance with his new wife's instruction not to communicate with Nathan at that moment indicates a lack of firmness and authority. It appears as though the father prioritizes maintaining a calm situation over addressing the underlying conflict, which in fact further worsens his relationship with Nathan.

Myth

At the myth level, the scene reflects a common cultural belief that when conflict arises between a father and a child, the easiest solution is to remain silent or avoid the situation by leaving when they encounter each other. This belief suggests that avoiding confrontation can prevent greater conflict. However, the scene also implies that silence and avoidance without explanation may actually deepen the conflict if the issue is not resolved or communicated openly.

Furthermore, the scene also reflects a broader cultural myth about the role of the father within the family. In many social contexts, the father is expected to be the authoritative figure who maintains harmony and emotional stability within the household. When the father fails to communicate or take initiative to resolve conflict, the myth of paternal authority becomes weakened. This situation symbolically portrays the shifting power dynamics within the family, where the father appears passive and influenced by external factors, such as the presence of a new spouse.

In addition, the scene reinforces a social belief that children from broken families often develop emotional resistance or distance toward a parent who is perceived to have abandoned the family. This belief constructs the idea that unresolved parental absence may lead to feelings of disappointment, anger, and distrust that persist into adolescence. Thus,

the myth constructed in this scene reflects a wider societal narrative that silence within family relationships can symbolize emotional rupture rather than reconciliation.

Figure 2

Resource : Bstation

Denotation

This scene depicts a confrontation between Nathan and his father inside the house where they once lived together. At the time, Nathan's father is showing the house to a potential buyer who is looking around the property, as the father intends to sell the house.

Connotation

At the connotative level, Nathan interrupts his father's conversation while the father is offering the house for sale to the buyer who is present inside. Nathan speaks in a raised voice, attempting to challenge and dominate his father's decision-making behavior, which often occurs without prior communication with Nathan as the only child who remains in the family. The scene reflects an intense emotional outburst from Nathan, triggered by his father's repeated actions of making important decisions without discussing them with him or with the rest of the family.

Myth

At the level of myth, this scene reflects a belief that problems can be reduced or prevented from escalating by ignoring them and assuming that they will resolve themselves over time. However, the scene suggests that avoiding conflict without communicating about the problem may actually lead to greater and more intense conflict in the future.

Furthermore, the scene also reflects a broader social myth regarding the authority of a father within the family. In many cultural contexts, the father is perceived as the primary decision-maker who holds the power to determine major aspects of family life, including financial decisions and property ownership. This belief often places children in a passive position, where they are expected to accept the father's decisions without question. Nathan's reaction in this scene symbolically challenges this traditional assumption by expressing resistance toward a decision that directly affects his emotional connection to the family home.

In addition, the scene reflects a cultural belief that the family home represents more than just a physical space; it symbolizes memories, emotional attachment, and a sense of belonging within the family. When Nathan's father decides to sell the house without involving Nathan in the discussion, it disrupts this symbolic meaning of home. As a result,

Nathan's anger can be interpreted as a response to the loss of emotional security and family identity associated with the house.

Figure 3

Resource : Bstation

Denotation

This scene depicts a moment of mourning following the death of Nathan's mother. The scene is attended by Nathan's grandmother, his father, his stepmother, Nathan's female friend, and Nathan himself, who stands beside his mother's grave while continuously looking at the burial site.

Connotation

At the connotative level, Nathan's grandmother is seen gently wiping Nathan's tears and trying to comfort him so that he does not remain overwhelmed by grief. Meanwhile, Nathan's father can only watch Nathan crying without saying a word or offering any form of comfort. He also does not visibly express sadness over the passing of his former wife, Nathan's mother, which emphasizes emotional distance and restraint in his behavior.

Myth

The myth reflected in this scene is the belief that men must remain strong in the face of deep sadness and that they should not cry in response to painful events. Instead, men are often expected to remain silent or avoid showing emotional expressions, reinforcing the cultural idea that masculinity is associated with emotional restraint.

Furthermore, the scene also reflects a broader cultural belief that fathers often struggle to express emotional closeness toward their children during moments of vulnerability. In many social contexts, paternal figures are expected to demonstrate strength and composure rather than emotional openness. As a result, silence can become a symbolic form of emotional distance, even though it may actually conceal feelings of grief or helplessness.

In addition, the presence of the grandmother comforting Nathan reinforces another cultural myth that emotional caregiving within the family is more commonly associated with maternal or feminine figures. Women are often perceived as the primary source of empathy and emotional support in times of loss, while men are expected to maintain composure and stability. This contrast highlights how cultural expectations about gender roles shape the way individuals express grief and provide comfort within the family.

Figure 4

Resource : Bstation

Denotation

This scene shows Nathan working at a workshop when he is approached by his father. Upon seeing his father, Nathan immediately walks away, attempting to avoid the encounter and refusing to meet or speak with him.

Connotation

At the connotative level, Nathan's decision to walk away from his father reflects his deep disappointment and emotional hurt, to the point where he no longer wishes to meet or interact with him. Meanwhile, Nathan's father continues to follow him and eventually expresses that he acknowledges the mistakes he has made toward Nathan and the family. This moment becomes significant because Nathan finally begins to listen to the confession and acknowledgment that he has long wanted to hear from his father.

Myth

The myth reflected in this scene is the belief that men or adult males often refuse to admit their mistakes because doing so may be perceived as lowering their pride or dignity. As a result, many men are socially expected to maintain their pride rather than openly admitting fault or apologizing, even when doing so could help repair damaged relationships.

Furthermore, the scene also reflects a broader cultural belief that reconciliation within family relationships often requires one party to take the first step in acknowledging past mistakes. In many social narratives, fathers are portrayed as authoritative figures who rarely admit wrongdoing to their children. Therefore, when a father finally expresses regret, it symbolically challenges the cultural expectation that paternal authority must always remain unquestioned.

In addition, the scene reflects the belief that emotional wounds within family relationships can persist for a long time if they are not addressed through open communication. Nathan's initial refusal to face his father symbolizes the accumulation of unresolved disappointment and resentment. The father's attempt to confess and admit his mistakes suggests that honesty and acknowledgment are necessary steps in rebuilding trust and restoring broken familial bonds.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that the representation of the father's silent treatment in the film Dear Nathan is not merely portrayed as ordinary silence, but as a communication practice rich in meaning. This behavior represents emotional distance, authority, and a parenting pattern that positions the father in a dominant role within the family relationship. On the other hand, the silent treatment also indicates the limitations of the father figure in expressing feelings openly, which creates a rigid and tension-filled relational dynamic.

Through Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis, it is found that the father's silence constructs meaning on three levels of signification. At the denotative level, it appears as the avoidance of communication. At the connotative level, it is interpreted as a symbol of control and disappointment. At the level of myth, it reflects the ideology of the father as a firm, rational figure with minimal emotional expression. This representation demonstrates how film both reproduces and opens space for reflection on the social construction of the father's role within the family.

Thus, this research is important because it contributes to the study of family communication and media studies, particularly in understanding how nonverbal communication practices such as silent treatment are constructed and interpreted in popular culture. The findings are expected to enrich the discourse on father–child relationships and encourage a critical reading of representations of family communication patterns in Indonesian films.

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