



A semiotic analysis on Kanye West's *Runaway* short movie

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to analyze the short movie *Runaway*, directed by a Chicago artist and musician, Kanye West, to find the meaning stored in the sign in the work using Roland Barthes' (1977) semiotic theory. This theory interprets things like words, images, sounds, gestures, and objects to embrace any system of signs regardless of their nature and limitations. According to Barthes (1977), signs are divided into two types, which are denotative and connotative. Denotative is the most apparent meaning of the symbol while connotative describes a concept that is connected to a word or evoked by an emotion or a cultural value. The study has revealed that there are five significant signs in *Runaway*, in which Kanye West, who is the main character, runs in a forest, a herd of deer, ballerinas in black costumes, the phoenix, and Ku Klux Klan organization. This finding suggests that analyzing literary work like movies, songs, novels, and other forms of art needs more than just literal meaning. There could be other meanings underlying the printed texts or images, which can reveal the cultural values behind the work.

Keywords: Kanye West; Roland Barthes; Semiotics; Short Movie.

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INTRODUCTION

Movie is a compilation of moving images accompanied by sound that tells a story (Hornby, 2006). Unlike other media, a movie is able to create an identity and become a voice for cultural representation. The director can portray a culture and the audience can see how culture works in society (Sere et al., 2020). Movies can be classified into several categories such as documentaries, fiction, animated movies, and short movies. Short movie is a media that combines songs and images, made for promotional or artistic purposes with a shorter duration than the film in general (Kabadayi, 2012).

Kanye West is an American musician and designer who was born in Atlanta, Georgia in 1977. Widely known as Ye, he is considered as one of the greatest and most influential hip hop musicians of all time by Forbes Magazine (2018). However, in 2010, Kanye West got into a well known career ending situation involving an upcoming star Taylor Swift. Fortunately, Kanye proved people wrong and bounced his career back by releasing his fifth album called *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy* (2010). West even made a short movie based on the album entitled *Runaway*. Unlike other short movies that convey most of the message through the actors'

conversations, *Runaway* addresses most of the messages through signs and symbols. Understanding signs and symbols is quite important especially in a short movie like *Runaway*. By exploring and learning this short movie, we can understand what is in the moral message implied by someone who is African-American and known as a polarizing and controversial public figure who was publicly hated at that time.

Runaway is not only considered as a short movie, but it also meets the criteria as a music video because most of the message the artist wants to convey is poured through the music. Austerlitz (2007) stated that the music video initially was intended only for commercial interests. However, along the way, a music video was born as a creative work to address certain messages. The message in a short movie and other forms of arts is not always addressed explicitly, but also it is present in a form of implicit sign and symbol which must be studied to get the deeper meaning to avoid misinterpretation.

The study regarding a system of signs and all that is related to meaning in communication is called semiotics. Saussure (1916) claims that semiotics aim to embrace any system of signs regardless of their nature and limitations. Years

later, Roland Barthes (1977) expanded the idea by focusing on the interactions between the text and the personal and cultural experiences of its readers as well as the interactions between textual norms and conventions that readers are likely to encounter and expect. Barthes' semiotic theory interprets things like words, images, sounds, gestures, and objects into two meanings, namely denotative and connotative signs. Moreover, Barthes (1977) stated that denotative refers to the most obvious meaning of the symbol while connotative describes a concept that is connected to a word or evoked by an emotion or cultural values.

There have been several studies on signs and symbols in entertainment media in the form of audio-visuals such as movies and music videos using Roland Barthes theory. One study focuses on analyzing gender equality in South Korea through a music video by Blackpink titled "Ddu-du Ddu-du". In this study, Isabel, Rooselinda, Harrianto, and Tolosa (2022) concluded that this Korean girl band is one of the inspirations in gender equality in the modern era. They found that Blackpink is encouraging people to be aware of empowering individuals, especially women. Dianiya (2020) also used Roland Barthes semiotic theory in her study of *Parasite* (2019). He stated that *Parasite* demonstrates class distinctions can be portrayed through indications that can be socially understood by the audience themselves and are essentially things we encounter in regular social life, rather than only through the terms "rich" and "poor". Signs and symbols are not only found in an audio visual work, but they are also found in a text like a novella titled "The Old Man and The Sea" (1952) by Ernest Hemingway. According to Tamami and Susilowati (2022), there are several symbols contained in this novella and one of them is marlin fish. They believe that marlin fish symbolizes strength, challenge, never give up, and a symbol that also represents the figure of the main character itself.

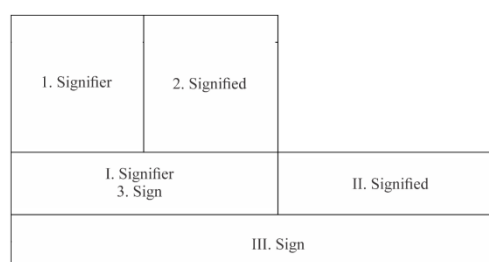
Based on the previous studies, there is still little research on movies directed by African-American musicians. *Runaway* is also a unique form of audio-visual media because it can be considered as a music video and a short movie. Employing Roland Barthes signs and symbol theory, this study analyzed signs and symbols in a short movie entitled *Runaway*.

METHOD

This research used a qualitative method to analyze the meaning of the signs and symbols shown in the Kanye West *Runaway* short movie as the research object, alongside with the semiotics theory by Roland Barthes. Woods (2006) stated that it is obvious that qualitative research gathers information about issues and incidents related to everyday

occurrences and analyzes how those events are reflected in literary works based on the researchers' observations of the actual world.

According to Barthes' (1977) semiotics theory, sign and symbols can be categorized into two orders of signification which are denotation and connotation. Denotation and connotation are terms used in semiotics to describe the connection between the signifier (the shape created by a physical element, such as sounds, letters, images, etc) and its signified (the concept or image that the signifier alludes to) (Sebeok, 2001). This theory is able to assist in the analysis of signs such as audio and visual in order to derive denotative and connotative meanings, which will then demonstrate what message to convey from the film.



Sign (Denotative) (3) composed of signifier (1) and signified (2). Denotation can be regarded as the first order of signification. So, the signifier (I) is a connotative signifier that employs a denotative sign. It has the connotation of a second order of signification. After that, the connotative signifier must produce a connotative signified (II) in order to produce the sign (III), or connotative sign.

In order to obtain the implied meaning of the research object, properties, action, places, colors, and other elements of the selected scenes of short movie *Runaway* were identified. Then, they were divided into three categories: denotation, connotation, and myth. The signs were then listed in a table and examined after that. The degrees of significance were used to identify the implied meanings. Lastly, the semiotic analysis was presented to uncover the meanings of *Runaway*.

The data source of the study is a short movie called *Runaway* that was uploaded on Youtube on October 26, 2010. The story of *Runaway* revolves around the character Griffin (Kanye West), who falls in love with a phoenix-human hybrid after she crashes to Earth (Selita Ebanks). This short movie is directed by Kanye himself and written by a director and producer Hype Williams.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This part explains the findings and the discussion of the signs and symbols presented in the short movie entitled *Runaway* by Kanye West and discovers the hidden meaning behind them using Roland Barthes

semiotic theory. The study finds that there are many signs and symbols that have hidden meaning in *Runaway*. The study found that there are five signs and five symbols from selected scenes and those signs are categorized into two types, which are communal signification and personal signification. Personal signification is the meaning of the sign related to the life of the artist, Kanye West and communal signification is the meaning of the sign related to society. In addition, in this study, the signs and symbols chosen are those most significant to the artist's life when making this short film.

Personal Signification

The first sign of personal signification can be seen in the beginning of the movie. In this scene, Kanye West is shown running in a dark forest. The scene consists of several aspects which can be interpreted into several meanings. Aspects that can be interpreted, for example, color, lighting, facial expression, shot, and angle.

Figure 1

Kanye West running in a forest.

Signifier	Signified
Kanye West running in a forest.	Selected scene 1 (00:01) Kanye West running through a dark forest.
Signifier	Signified
Kanye's life at that time is portrayed in this scene.	Struggle, runaway.
Sign	
Kanye, who was hated by many at the time, flew to Hawaii to isolate himself.	

This short film begins with Kanye West running in the forest taken in long shot. Kanye running through the forest perfectly symbolizes West's life struggle post VMA incident. When he was a public enemy, he went to Hawaii to recover his mental condition and also to create the album that later would be adapted into this *Runaway* short movie. The forest shown in the scene is not just an ordinary forest, but it is dark, foggy, and gloomy forest. The lighting of the scene is harshly toned with luminescent fog that is slowly catching him, giving the impression that he is running for his life from something dangerous that is overtaking him. It signifies something that Kanye avoids is his mistakes and the bad things people say about him.

The second sign is a group of deer that are shown in several scenes of the short movie. The schema below analyzes some of the deer symbolism from various perspectives and relates it to Kanye West's life.

Figure 2

Deer.

Signifier	Signified
Deer.	Selected scene 2 (01:19) A herd of deer in the forest.
Signifier	Signified
Deer represent Kanye West's life.	Not giving up easily.
Sign	
Kanye did not give up even though he was publicly hated.	

Deer are animals that live in the wild. These animals are often preyed upon by predators such as lions, tigers, and other carnivore animals. In this *Runaway* music video, a herd of deer is displayed a lot. In this context, the deer represents Kanye West's life when he was universally hated because of the VMA incident where he embarrassed an upcoming popstar, Taylor Swift by saying that she did not deserve the award she just received. At that time of being hated by the public, like a deer being chased by a predator, Kanye did not give up even though many people said his career was over. Moreover, since Kanye West is a Christian and has made plenty of gospel songs, he might take the deer reference from psalm 18:33 "He makes my feet like the feet of a deer; he causes me to stand on the heights". In addition, the nature of the deer which is often seen as prey by predators can also signify the vulnerable side of Kanye. He wants to tell his audience that someone who is hated and considered arrogant by many people has a vulnerable side as well. Kanye also shows his vulnerability when he sings the song that has the same title as this short film, *Runaway* (13:57). It tells the story about his relationship with a celebrity, Amber Rose, his arrogance, insecurity, and sorrow.

Figure 3

Phoenix

Signifier	Signified
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Phoenix.	Selected scene 3 (29:48) Phoenix with colorful wings.
Signifier	Signified
The philosophy of phoenix symbolizes Kanye's career after the VMA incident and also the style of his works.	Redemption.
Sign	
Kanye West's career was bounced back by releasing his magnum-opus.	

In *Runaway*, the phoenix is shown as the main character. Originally from Greece, the phoenix is a mythical creature that is able to be reborn by taking power from its predecessor when it dies. It signifies the idiom 'living and learning' and perfectly symbolizes the redemption of West's career where he is accepted again by the public after that infamous VMA incident. Moreover, the color variations owned by the phoenix illustrate how diverse Kanye West's works are. Unlike most musicians that stick to their comfort genre, West has made plenty of music other than rap/hip-hop such as RnB and electronic dance music (EDM).

The fourth sign is a group of ballerinas. Unlike ballerinas in general, the ballerina in this short film wears a black costume. In the following scheme, the selection of ballerina costumes will be analyzed and related to the artist's life.

Figure 4
Ballerinas in black costumes.

Signifier	Signified
Ballerinas in black costumes.	Selected scene 4 (14:16) Ballerinas dancing in black costume
Signifier	Signified
Ballerinas in black costume represent Kanye's work in the public eye	Misjudgment.
Sign	
Kanye West addresses message regarding racism	

The misjudgement of Kanye West's works

Ballet is a style of performance dance that first appeared in the fourteenth century during the Italian Renaissance. Ballerinas choreograph and carry out ballets. Due to the high potential of injuries, including stress fractures, eating disorders, and low bone density, being a ballerina in these situations is a significant honor that denotes remarkable talent and achievement (Turner & Wainwright, 2003). *Runaway* features a ballet dance scene. However, unlike ballerinas usually wear brightly colored costumes, in this short film, they wear black costumes. The black color on the ballerina's costumes also represents Kanye's aggressive nature and his dark time (Linhartova et al., 2013). It could be inferred that Kanye West tries to convince people that beautiful works of art will always be beautiful, even if they were created by someone who is controversial and has a bad image in public.

Communal Signification

Beside personal signification, there is also communal signification. It is found that there is a sign that is classified as communal signification which is a sign of a group of people who are partying. However, the party here is not an ordinary party, but the people who attend this party wear white robes and masks. In American history, the people who dressed like this were a racist organization called the Ku Klux Klan. In the scheme below, the reason for the organization's presence in the short film *Runaway* will be analyzed

Figure 5
Ku Klux Klan

Signifier	Signified
Ku Klux Klan.	Selected scene 4 (08:56) White supremacist group attending a party
Signifier	Signified
Ku Klux Klan is a white supremacist and terrorist who have minorities in America as their target.	Racism
Sign	
Kanye West addresses message regarding racism	

Ku Klux Klan is a white supremacist and terrorist who targets minorities in America (Dixon & Wintz, 2015). The members of this organization wear a white robe with cone-shaped face mask as their identity. In this short film, the Ku Klux Klan is shown having a party. Since Kanye is an African-American, he tries to convey the message that racism is still around even though he lives in the 21st century when the organization is no longer active. Kanye also experienced racist treatment from people after the VMA incident so his work is not appreciated as it should be,

The messages conveyed by Kanye West are not explicitly shown in the short movie. Instead, they are communicated through signs that are being analyzed in this study using Roland Barthes semiotics theory. Ibrahim and Sulaiman (2020) state that studying signs and symbols in a movie helps us to get the full moral messages that are addressed by the creator of the movie and understanding those signs and symbols in communication becomes something that is necessary to find meaning. Van Zoest (1993) also says in his study that movies are typically filled with a variety of signs that work well together to produce the desired effects, especially in the form of images and sounds.

In Kanye West's short movie, *Runaway*, Kanye tries to address several issues such as how the infamous VMA incident affected his mental health, his works, and how he bounced his career back. In addition, since Kanye West is a African-American, he also addresses racial issues through this 30 minute short movie. Specifically, he wants people to know that even though he is a widely-known celebrity, he is also a regular human who has weaknesses and sometimes makes mistakes. It is proven in the song (13:57) that is sung by Kanye in this short film. The song is also entitled "Runaway" and it tells the story about his relationship with a celebrity, Amber Rose, his arrogance, insecurity, and sorrow.

In this study, Kanye shows that he is a religious person by displaying several Christian related lyrics and symbols. Boserren and Rivalny (2021) also state the same thing in their research. They said that Kanye West used many biblical references and Christian lyrics in his later album. Additionally, this study strengthens the findings of the study by Vicky Dianiya (2020), which stated that the color black has negative racial prejudices in most contexts such as black sheep and black ball.

CONCLUSION

It is found that the signs and symbols in *Runaway* are four personal significations and one communal signification. In the personal signification, Kanye wants his audiences to know his situation and mental health when he was hated at that time. In

addition, he tells people that wealthy celebrities like him also have insecurity and vulnerable side. Furthermore, in the communal signification, he reminds his audiences that racism still exists. It is proven that arts that are created by black community are not appreciated by people as they should be.

After doing this study, several lessons can be learned. In analyzing someone's work like a movie, song, novel, and any other form of art, we cannot only take the literal meaning. There is certainly meaning that cannot be seen if we do not see and study the cultural value behind the work. Therefore, in order to get the deeper meaning of a work, it is really important to know and understand the artists and their problems, especially in a short movie like *Runaway* that has numerous signs which can not be understood entirely without conducting additional studies.

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