

The Framing of the Semiotic Codes in Five Filipino Movie Posters

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Abstract

A movie poster, as an adjunct to a film, is not only a powerful instrument of mass visual advertisement, but also a mode of communication and a tool of persuasion. This article examines and analyzes, through the conceptual lenses of semiotic and framing theories, how movie posters communicate social and cultural transformations brought about by Western influence. The themes that emerged from the texts and images in the five Filipino movie posters of Star Cinema media company are the following: 1) Dominant Ideology with subthemes patriarchy or gender inequality, hierarchy in society, capitalism, colonialism or Western influence, and religion; and 2) Social Norms with subthemes sexual behavior/public display of affection, tradition, marriage rites, and family norms. The use of particular colors, text and image size, positioning of images and text, choice of symbolic objects, characters' poses and facial expressions all add to the meaning and interpretation of the framed semiotic codes. Since the audiences perceive the world through their frames, it is in this perception that their frames construct their social reality.

Keywords: Semiotic Code, Framing, Dominant Ideology, Western Influence, Gender Inequality, Social Norms

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Introduction

A movie poster, as an adjunct to the film, usually displays attractive images representative of the film. A movie poster is undoubtedly a potent visual element which promotes a film's themes and narratives (Errington, 2015). However, a movie poster is not just an instrument for promoting the film. It is also a mode of communication, and a tool of persuasion.

It is important to note that a movie poster is some kind of advertisement for a particular film. That is why a movie poster is created and mass produced to "sell" the film. Movie posters are one of the tools of persuasion the movie producers employ to lure us into the movie houses.

Although this study is not part of artistic research, it deals with the elements of composition that are used to communicate and interpret meaning. Scholars believe that media messages are essentially intriguing from a semiotic perspective because they usually consist of an invigorating blend of symbols that are organized spatially and chronologically to create an impression, transmit an idea, or elicit a meaning in an audience (Fry, D. & Fry, H., 1986).

This study focuses on the analysis of the framing of the semiotic codes of five Filipino movie posters of Star Cinema media company. By analyzing movie posters, we can gain a better understanding of the visual elements and semiotic codes that effectively capture the attention of movie-goers. Analyzing movie posters can also help us learn how to sell the film's storyline even before the audiences see it for themselves.

Semiotics, according to Robert T. Craig, explains and cultivates the use of signs and language to mediate between different perspectives. It is the study of the social production of meaning from sign systems. Filmmakers employ obvious symbolic signs in their films, e.g. sign of the cross, scales of justice in court dramas, musical score to signify impending danger, etc. Similarly, movie posters present symbolic signs that are associated with the films' themes and narratives.

Framing theory, on the other hand, suggests that how something, i.e. frame, is presented to the audience influences the choices people make about how to process that information or message. Frames allow the movie goers or audiences to identify and understand otherwise meaningless events, giving meaning to the ongoing activities of life (Goffman, 1974).

Drawing from Roland Barthes' Semiotic Theory and Erving Goffman's Framing Theory, I would like to find the answer to the following research problem: How are the semiotic codes framed to reflect the narratives and themes of the five Filipino movie posters produced by Star Cinema media company?

In consonance with this research problem, this study specifically aims to: 1) identify and explain the denotative and connotative meanings of the semiotic codes framed in the images and texts of the five Filipino movie posters; 2) describe and interpret the framing of the different semiotic codes that reflect the plots and themes of the five Filipino movie posters; and 3) analyze the discourse created by the aesthetic and ideological factors framed in the semiotic interpretation of the social and cultural contexts reflected in the five Filipino movie posters.

Movie posters play an important role in attracting audiences, so the results of this study could help add insights to the fields of advertising (how to sell the movie), publicity, visual

communication and popular art/culture, business (how to increase movie outfit's revenues), media/communication studies (impact to the audiences). This study also offers theoretical and practical significance in increasing awareness of the semiotic codes framed in the movie posters.

Finally, the results of this study can help other designers, artists, researchers, and communication and media students to understand how to analyze the content of the framed semiotic codes in the images and texts of movie posters by genre, by time period, by director, by actor or actress, or by movie outfit, and learn how to interpret the denotative and connotative meanings of these images and texts.

Framework of the Study

Ferdinand de Saussure defined semiology as “a science that studies the life of signs within society” (1959, p. 16). French semiologist Roland Barthes (1972) explained that the goal of semiotics is interpreting the verbal and nonverbal signs. He argued that signs subtly communicate ideological or connotative meaning and perpetuate the dominant values of society; thus, they are deceptive (Griffin, 1996).

A sign has a denotation and a connotation (Griffin, 1996). Denotation is the literal meaning of a word while connotation represents the various overtones, cultural implications, or emotional meanings associated with a sign. Connotation describes the subjective interpretation of the sign that evokes feelings or emotions from the audiences, and are associated with the values of their culture (Fiske & Hartley, 1978).

Barthes (1968) considered texts to be open to many possible interpretations. He considered the meaning of the finished text (i.e., movie poster) is to be created by the audience, so a text always remains open. We can understand characters, genre, storyline, theme, etc. through the signs and symbols in a text. These aspects are found through media language such as colors, images, text, balance, and positioning of the figures in the movie posters.

In his theory, Barthes (1968) presented five semiotic codes: 1) the symbolic code which is similar to connotation but deeper in meaning; 2) the semantic code which refers to the hidden meaning of the image or text; 3) the proairetic or action code which refers to any other action or event that indicates something else is going to happen; 4) the hermeneutic or enigma code which refers to any element of the story that is not fully explained and becomes a mystery to the audience; 5) the fifth is the cultural or referential code which is a part of media product that we can only understand if we are a part of that particular culture.

On the other hand, Erving Goffman believes that the goal of framing is to focus the audience's attention on a particular part of a message in order to achieve a specific reaction (Hallahan, 2008). According to the framing theory, the media highlights certain events and then places them within a particular context or a field of meaning to encourage or discourage certain interpretations. In this way, the media exercises a selective influence over how people view reality. Framing, therefore, is what constructs social reality. According to Goffman (1974), frames are mostly cultural in origin.

Conceptual Framework

In *The German Ideology*, Karl Marx associated ideology with the ideas of the dominant class (Giddens, 1983). Giddens argued that dominant ideologies may be defined as shared ideas or beliefs which serve to justify the interests of dominant groups. In my study, the dominant ideologies, e.g. patriarchy or gender inequality, hegemony (power) or hierarchy in society, colonialism or Western influence, capitalism, and religion, affect and influence the framing of the text and images in the five Filipino movie posters.

Social norms are rules of behavior that exert social influence on group members by prescribing which behaviors are appropriate in certain situations (Panopio & Raymundo, 2004). Social norms such as sexual behaviors (e.g. public display of affection), etiquette, family norms, marriage rites, and traditions influence one's behavior because, through a process of socialization from infancy till death, they become part of one's motives for action. Therefore, it could be presumed that social norms are reflected in the framing of the text and images in the five Filipino movie posters (See Figure 1).

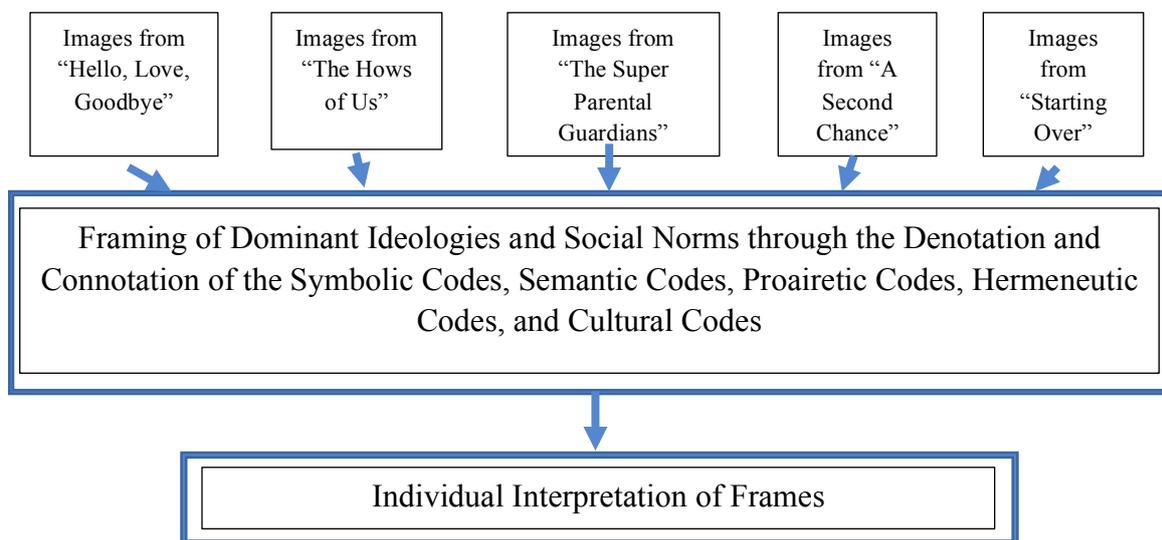


Figure 1. Conceptual Model Integrating Semiotic Theory and Framing Theory

In my conceptual framework (Figure 1), the dominant ideologies and social norms are reflected in the denotation and connotation of the signs, which are framed in the texts and images found in the five Filipino movie posters. The connotation contains the framed semiotic codes, namely symbolic, semantic, hermeneutic/ enigma, proairetic/ narrative/action, and cultural/referential. The framed semiotic codes found in the texts and images of the five Filipino movie posters influence and affect the individual interpretation of the frames.

Methods

The research method I used in this study was qualitative content analysis in identifying, analyzing, and interpreting the denotative and connotative meanings of the framed semiotic codes. I downloaded five Filipino movie posters that I chose from the list of top 10 highest-grossing movies of Star Cinema media company in the last ten years. I chose the movies that I have watched so that I can analyze the verbal and visual elements of the movie posters in reference to the themes, narratives, and characters of the selected movies.

The units of analysis were the visual elements in the five Filipino movie posters produced by Star Cinema media company: 1) “Hello, Love, Goodbye” (2019); 2) “The Hows of Us” (2018); 3) “The Super Parental Guardians” (2016); 4) “A Second Chance” (2015); and 5) “Starting Over Again” (2014).

Results and Discussion

Denotative and Connotative Meanings

In the movie poster “Hello, Love, Goodbye,” the title signifies that a couple will meet, fall in love, and part ways. The most prominent image in the poster is the two lead characters with the man’s arm positioned over the woman’s shoulder while both of them are looking and smiling at each other. This pose indicates that they are in a romantic relationship.

The next image is the Hong Kong street with tall buildings and various advertisements with Chinese characters indicating that many businesses are promoting and selling different products. Another element is the blurred image of Chinese people walking and rushing down the street. This signifies that people are always busy and in a hurry in highly urbanized Hong Kong (See Figure 2).



Figure 2. “Hello, Love, Goodbye” Movie Poster

In the movie poster “The Hows of Us,” the man’s position which is one step higher than the woman’s position which signifies that the man has more power and authority than the woman. The next element is the woman’s pose--her right cheek is resting on her right hand--which signifies that she is sad and disappointed. Another image is the man’s pose, i.e., he is holding a bunch of flowers, which signifies that he is wooing the woman. The last relevant image in the poster is the house which implies that the house plays a significant role in their lives (See Figure 3).

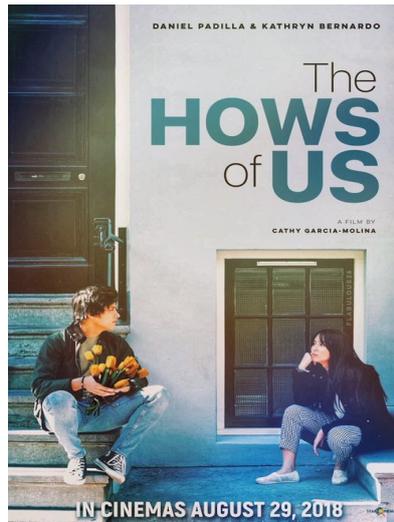


Figure 3. “The Hows of Us” Movie Poster

In the movie poster “The Super Parental Guardians,” the title itself implies that at least two people have taken the role of parental guardians to at least one child. The word “super” signifies either having superpower or the tasks they are assuming in the absence of the real parents are overwhelming but they are able to accomplish them effectively. The next image is the male character trying to run which signifies that he wants to escape something, perhaps family responsibility.

Another image is the shanties which signifies that the main characters are poor and lived in a slum area. The next element is the image of the two boys, i.e., a young boy beside the man wearing a woman’s gown and a younger boy holding on to the left leg of a man. This image signifies that the two young boys are the wards of the two guardians. The last relevant image is the six people in the background which implies that they are either close friends or relatives of the main characters who help the guardians take care of the two wards. (See Figure 4).



Figure 4. “The Super Parental Guardians Movie Poster

In the movie poster “A Second Chance,” the title implies that a couple in a relationship broke up and then got back together again. Another element is the blurred image of the altar in the background which signifies that the couple is either married or getting married. The last relevant element is the image of a couple in a forehead-to-forehead position and smiling at

each other, with the woman’s hands touching the neck and jawline of the man. This signifies that the couple is totally in love (See Figure 5).



Figure 5. “A Second Chance” Movie Poster

In the movie poster “Starting Over Again,” the title indicates that a couple broke up; then, they got back together again. The next element is the image of a man cuddling a woman which signifies that the couple is in a romantic relationship. The last relevant element is the letter or email in the background which implies that the couple could have been writing love letters to each other (See Figure 6).

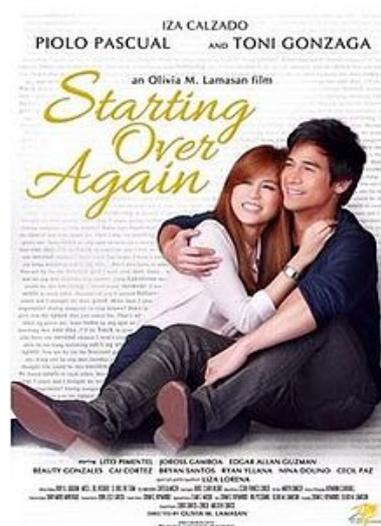


Figure 6. “Starting Over Again” Movie Poster

The Framed Semiotic Codes

Symbolic Codes

In the movie poster “Hello, Love, Goodbye,” the tall buildings symbolize city life and business establishments while the image of advertisements in Chinese characters symbolize products (local and foreign) being sold by different businesses. In the movie poster “The Super Parental Guardians,” the image of the shanties beside the train tracks symbolize

poverty while the red gown and headdress worn by the gay character symbolize Chinese culture.

In the movie poster “The Hows of Us,” the house in the background symbolizes conjugal abode or family, and the bunch of tulips (flowers) that the male character is holding symbolizes love, romance, or apology. Tulips symbolize Amsterdam, the dream destination of the female character.

In the movie poster “A Second Chance,” the blurred image of the church altar in the background symbolizes wedding/marriage and faith. In the movie poster “Starting Over Again,” the image of the letter/email in the background signifies communication.

Semantic Codes

In the movie poster “Hello, Love, Goodbye,” the bold pink letters signify love and romance. By looking at the image of the boy’s arm over the girl’s shoulder, we can infer that the couple is in a romantic relationship. The image also shows the couple is looking at each other and smiling which signifies their happy romantic relationship.

In the movie poster “The Hows of Us,” the bluish letters, clothes, and shadows signify melancholy, sadness and depression. The image of the steps outside the house signifies the steps in a love relationship--from courtship to marriage. The male character is seated one step higher than the female character which signifies male superiority. The title of the movie has a semantic double meaning: 1) “how” the man can make the woman fall in love with him again; and 2) the “house” which refers to the couple’s conjugal abode.

In the movie poster “The Super Parental Guardians,” the prominent red (gown and letters) signifies joy, sexuality, passion, love, anger, courage, vigor, and will power. The word “super” signifies extraordinary ability.

In the movie poster “A Second Chance,” the red letters signify joy, sexuality, passion, love, anger, courage, vigor, and will power. The image of a couple who is in forehead-to-forehead pose, smiling at each other with the woman’s hands touching the neck and jawline of the man signifies that the couple is totally in love.

In the movie poster “Starting Over Again,” the prominent yellow letters signify caution, decay, sickness and jealousy. The image of the man cuddling the woman signifies that they were in a romantic relationship.

Hermeneutic Codes

In the movie poster “Hello, Love, Goodbye,” the framed hermeneutic code is the image of the two lead characters in Hong Kong. The reason why they are in Hong Kong is a mystery that the movie aims to unravel. Meanwhile the framed hermeneutic code in the movie poster “The Hows of Us” is the image of the two lead characters distant from each other with the man holding a bunch of tulips.

In the movie poster “the Super Parental Guardians,” the presence of the moving train in the background signifies a mystery as to what might happen in the story. In the movie poster

“Starting Over Again,” the content of the letter/email in the background is a mystery to the audience.

Proairetic Codes

In the movie poster “The Super Parental Guardians,” the image of the lead characters trying to run signifies they are trying to escape from something while the image of the ward holding on to his guardian’s left leg signifies his desire to stop his guardian from running away and leaving him. In the movie poster “A Second Chance,” the image of the woman touching the man’s neck and jawline indicates her desire to kiss the man.

Cultural Codes

In the movie poster “The Hows of Us,” the image of the man holding flowers signifies his intent to woo the woman. The act of giving flowers to a woman is part of the Western culture which has been adopted by the Filipinos. Since many Filipinos have assimilated the Western culture, the images of the lead characters wearing Western clothes and displaying romantic gesture in public in the movie posters “Hello, Love, Goodbye,” “Starting Over Again” and “A Second Chance” can be classified as a framed cultural code. Although not a Filipino culture, the Chinese characters in the movie poster “Hello, Love, Goodbye” signify that the Filipino lead characters are in a foreign country trying to adjust to a different culture.

In the movie poster “The Super Parental Guardians,” the image of shanties signifies that the lead characters in the movie lived in a poor community and have different culture compared to people in rich communities.

The Social and Cultural Contexts

Dominant Ideology

Capitalism has always been a dominant ideology and a prominent Western ideal. Capitalism gave rise to the economic and social divide and the establishment of the social class system or hierarchy in society which distinguishes the rich from the poor. Capitalism is evident in the images of tall buildings and Chinese advertisements in Hong Kong and the blurred image of the people walking in the background in the movie poster of “Hello, Love, Goodbye.” Although the movie poster didn’t show the struggles of the two Filipino main characters in this movie, the real reason why the main characters went to Hong Kong is to work. The female character has to work two jobs to save enough money to support her family in the Philippines. The image of the smiling couple in the poster is deceptive because it presents an illusion that they are happy, and they are in Hong Kong for a pleasure trip.

The hierarchical structure of society not only reflects the social reality that some groups of people are more dominant (rich) than the others (poor), but also demonstrates power relations. Because of these differences in social position, the dominant and the subordinate groups are afforded different experiences; therefore, they perceive the world differently. The social class distinction (hierarchy in society) is evident in the movie poster “The Super Parental Guardians” which presents the image of the shanties signifying poverty. In the Philippines, many slum communities are built beside the train tracks, so the image of the train in the movie poster presents this social reality. The framed cultural code portrayed through the rugged, plain-looking clothes worn by the characters in the movie also reflects social

position. It is interesting to note that the striking red gown worn by the gay character indicated that aside from his intense desire to assume a different role (i.e., mother), the red gown also signifies his ardent desire to assume a different identity—one that exudes class and affluence.

One commonality in all five movie posters is the use of English in the title which reflects our adherence and submission to Western influence. Filipinos haven't really gotten rid of colonialism even up to this day. We have learned through socialization and miseducation that anything foreign is better and worth emulating. That is why even in movie titles, audiences are made to think that the movie is better, classier, more appealing and more interesting if it has a Western touch. The Western influence/colonialism is evident in the framed semantic codes of all five movie titles, as well as in the framed cultural code of the costumes.

In pre-colonial Philippines, there was equality between the sexes (Titgemeyer, 1998). The women occupied a highly respected position in our egalitarian society (Aguja, 2013). However, in modern Philippines, patriarchy has led to a male-dominated society and culture. Deep-rooted patriarchy is one of the causes of the gender power gap in today's world perpetuating the male superiority over the female's physiological vulnerability. Social inequality that results from beliefs in stereotypical roles is due to the fact that social institutions have historically been developed by men (Kramarae, 1981). Patriarchy and gender inequality are reflected in the movie poster "The Hows of Us." Padilla is seated one step higher than Bernardo which signifies male superiority."

Religion, another dominant ideology, is reflected in the image of the church altar in the movie poster "A Second Chance." The image suggests that the lead characters in the movie might get married or are already married. The church altar also signifies faith, which is the main issue or theme in this movie.

Social Norms

Film is a fictional sphere (Jordan, 2014) wherein romantic scenes depicting public display of affection is rendered invulnerable for audiences to observe; thus, allowing the escape from the conventions of society. Sexual behavior or the public display of affection, as seen in the framed semantic code in the movie poster "Hello, Love, Goodbye" through the image of the boy's arm over the girl's shoulder, and in the movie poster "Starting Over Again" through the image of the man cuddling a woman, reflects a rebellious behavior against the conservative values and tradition of old. Just like in the movie poster "Hello, Love, Goodbye," the image of the lovers embracing each other in the movie poster "Starting Over Again" is also deceptive because it presents an illusion that the couple has a happy romantic relationship, but in the movie, the two main characters fail to get back together as a couple.

In some countries like Hong Kong, some conservative people still frown upon this behavior and find it disrespectful. The public display of affection is definitely a Western influence coming from the influx of Hollywood movies and American/European television shows that we watch where they show liberated romantic or sexual life in very awkward situations. Chinese culture, and to some extent Filipino culture, do not encourage public display of emotions, and believe that physical intimacy should be done only in the comforts of one's home or inside the bedroom.

The Filipino family as the basic unit of society has a social structure guided by the norms, expectations, and values of the family members (Panopio & Raymundo, 2004). In the movie poster “The Hows of Us,” the house in the background demonstrates the framed symbolic code of conjugal abode indicating the characters’ life together as a family. The distance or space between the couple signifies a rift in the relationship. The overall feeling I got from perusing this movie poster is that the mood is cold and stiff which reflects the sadness of the film’s narrative.

The Filipino society and culture tend to be collectivist, which means that the interest of the group (e.g., family) prevails over the interest of the individual (Panopio & Raymundo, 2004). Collectivist cultures are tightly integrated or closely knit, stressing interdependent activities and common concerns, and acting for the common good. In the movie “The Super Parental Guardians,” the gay lead character is a very close friend of the deceased mother of the two children, so he assumes the responsibility of taking care of his friend’s children. The other male lead character is the uncle of the two orphans. In the movie poster, the framed proairetic code is reflected in the image of the characters trying to run which implies that in some part of the movie the characters would try to escape from something, e.g. responsibilities of being a father or mother to the two wards. It is part of our culture and tradition as Filipinos to help and take care of our extended family. Although the movie poster does not give any hint as to the relationships of the characters in the poster, the audience can infer that the characters in the foreground have close relationships.

The image of the bunch of flowers that the leading man is holding in the movie poster “The Hows of Us” reflects the traditional way of courting girls although this practice can be considered a Western influence. The image of the house as conjugal abode represented marriage and family norm while in the movie poster “A Second Chance,” the blurred image of the church altar in the background represents marriage, indicating too that the couple is Catholic.

Conclusion

The aim of this qualitative study was to analyze the content and framing of the semiotic codes in the five Filipino movie posters of Star Cinema media company. I used content analysis in analyzing the framed semiotic codes based on the concepts of Roland Barthes’ Semiotic Theory and Erving Goffman’s Framing Theory. I chose the movies that I have already watched because I wanted to determine if the movie posters reflected the narratives, characters, and themes of the movies. Roland Barthes’ Semiotic Theory stated that texts as well as visual elements are open to many possible interpretations from many different perspectives. This study focused on my own interpretation anchored in the concepts of the semiotic theory and framing theory. In analyzing the five Filipino movie posters, I identified and described the denotation and connotation of the framed semiotic codes and categorized these codes into themes.

The concept themes were Dominant Ideology with subthemes patriarchy (gender inequality), hierarchy in society, Western influence (colonialism), capitalism, and religion; and Social Norms with subthemes sexual behavior (public display of affection), family norms, tradition, and marriage. The use of colors and symbolic objects played a vital role in the presentation of the themes and narratives. In my analysis of the framed semiotic codes, the concept themes were reflected in the visual and verbal elements of the movie posters. However, in at least

two movie posters, the essence of the films' narratives were not evident, and the images were actually deceptive.

The use of particular colors, text and image size, positioning of images and text, choice of symbolic objects, characters' poses and facial expressions all add to the meaning and interpretation of the framed semiotic codes.

Future researchers might want to analyze framed semiotic codes in print advertisements or movie posters with the same genre, same lead character, same director, or comparative studies of Filipino movie posters and Hollywood movie posters.

No one can deny that a film is a compelling means of communication, a tool of persuasion and a catalyst of social change. As an adjunct to a film, a movie poster should also be just as potent in order to entice the audiences to watch the upcoming film. Therefore, the content of a movie poster must be framed with values as it influences and controls the audience. We, as audiences, perceive the world through our frames and it is in this perception that our frames construct social reality.

Roland Barthes once said that signs perpetuate the dominant values of society, and that semiotic theory lies somewhere between art and science (Barthes, 1979). I say, our interpretation of the semiotic codes lies somewhere between reality and illusion.

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