

The Construction of Struggle in *Gran Turismo* (2023): A Roland Barthes' Semiotic Analysis of Jann Mardenborough

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ABSTRACT

Keywords

Semiotics; Representation; Struggle;
Film; Roland Barthes; *Gran Turismo*

This study aims to analyze the construction of the meaning of struggle as represented through the character of Jann Mardenborough in the film *Gran Turismo* (2023). As a form of mass communication media, film not only conveys narratives but also constructs meaning through visual and symbolic signs that embody social and ideological values. This research employs a descriptive qualitative approach using Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis, which emphasizes three levels of signification: denotation, connotation, and myth. The data were collected through non-participant observation by repeatedly watching the film and selecting key scenes that represent the dynamics of the character's struggle. The analysis focuses on visual elements, dialogue, and cinematic aspects that contribute to the construction of meaning. The findings reveal that Jann's struggle is not constructed as a linear and heroic process, but rather as a complex and non-linear experience shaped by psychological limitations, social pressures, and systemic constraints. Furthermore, the film both reproduces and critiques dominant myths of success, particularly the assumption that hard work inevitably leads to success. Thus, struggle in this film is represented as a process characterized by contradiction, uncertainty, and identity negotiation. This study contributes to the development of film semiotics by offering a multidimensional perspective on the representation of struggle in popular media.

1. Introduction

Film, as a form of mass communication media, plays a significant role in shaping and representing social reality through narratives, visuals, and symbols. Beyond functioning merely as entertainment, film serves as a medium for the production of meaning that reflects cultural values, ideologies, and human experiences. From a media studies perspective, meaning in film is not inherently given but is constructed through systems of signs that can be critically analyzed (Hall, 1997).

The semiotic approach, particularly as developed by Roland Barthes (1977), enables researchers to deconstruct layers of meaning within media texts through three levels of signification: denotation, connotation, and myth. This approach has been widely applied in film studies to reveal how meaning is ideologically constructed through visual and narrative representations (Chandler, 2007). Therefore, film can be understood as a cultural text that is not neutral, but rather embedded with meaning constructions influenced by social and cultural contexts.

Previous studies have shown that the representation of struggle in media, particularly in film, is often associated with heroic narratives that emphasize success, strength, and the triumph of the main character. For instance, research by Nasaliya (2022) found that struggle in film is represented through

visual symbols that reinforce individual courage and resilience. Another study by Jernih and Lindawati (2025) demonstrated that women's struggles in film are constructed as forms of resistance against patriarchal structures through both visual and narrative representations. Meanwhile, Rizki (2024) highlighted how gender struggles are portrayed as efforts to challenge social stereotypes through symbolic elements and character construction.

In a broader context, studies on representation in film also emphasize that meaning is not solely derived from narrative, but from the interaction between text, context, and audience (Bordwell & Thompson, 2008). Another study by Manesah (2016) indicated that representations of life struggles in film can be identified through the analysis of scenes, dialogue, and cinematic elements that construct the social experiences of characters. However, most of these studies still tend to conceptualize struggle as a linear process oriented toward an end result, thus overlooking its complexity and inherent limitations.

The film *Gran Turismo* (2023), directed by Neill Blomkamp, presents a different representation of struggle through the character of Jann Mardenborough. As a gamer who transforms into a professional racing driver, Jann faces not only technical challenges but also psychological pressures, family expectations, and social stigma as an "outsider" in the professional racing world. This representation suggests that struggle is not always heroic; rather, it can be understood as a process marked by contradictions, uncertainty, and limitations.

The novelty of this research lies in its attempt to examine struggle not as a linear heroic narrative, but as a complex, non-linear construction of meaning influenced by psychological, social, and systemic dimensions through the semiotic approach of Roland Barthes. In addition, this study offers a new perspective by integrating sign analysis (denotation, connotation, myth) with multidimensional categories of struggle, thereby providing a more in-depth reading of character representation in popular films.

Based on the above considerations, this study aims to analyze the construction of the meaning of struggle in the film *Gran Turismo* (2023) through the character of Jann Mardenborough using Roland Barthes' semiotic approach. This research is expected to contribute to the development of media semiotics studies, particularly in understanding the representation of struggle in film as a construction of meaning that is not always heroic, but rather complex and contextual.

2. Method

This study employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive–interpretative design. This approach aims to understand and interpret meanings embedded in media texts through an in-depth reading of visual and verbal signs in film. A qualitative approach enables researchers to explore phenomena contextually and capture the complexity of meaning that cannot be adequately explained through quantitative methods (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

This study focuses on semiotic analysis as the primary method for examining visual texts. Semiotics is used to understand how signs function in the construction of meaning through the relationship between the signifier and the signified. In the context of film, signs encompass various elements, including facial expressions, body gestures, dialogue, lighting, visual composition, and other cinematic aspects that collectively form a system of meaning (Cobley & Jansz, 2002).

The object of this study is the film *Gran Turismo* (2023), directed by Neill Blomkamp, with a focus on the representation of the character Jann Mardenborough in the context of his struggle. The unit of analysis consists of selected scenes, chosen purposively based on the following criteria: (1) scenes containing conflict or obstacles experienced by the character, (2) scenes displaying significant visual symbols or signs, and (3) scenes contributing to character development within the narrative.

The data consist of both primary and secondary sources. Primary data are film scenes analyzed visually and narratively, while secondary data are obtained from relevant academic literature. Data collection was conducted through non-participant observation by repeatedly watching the film, taking notes on key scenes, and documenting visual elements and dialogue relevant to the research focus.

The data analysis technique applies the semiotic model of Roland Barthes, which emphasizes three levels of signification: denotation, connotation, and myth. The analysis was carried out systematically through the following stages:

- a. **Sign Identification** The researcher identifies various signs present in film scenes, including visual signs (gestures, expressions, settings, costumes, lighting) and verbal signs (dialogue and narration). At this stage, all elements with potential meaning are collected as units of analysis.
- b. **Denotative Analysis** At this stage, signs are analyzed based on their literal meaning, referring to what is directly visible and audible in the scene. The analysis focuses on objective description without subjective interpretation.
- c. **Connotative Analysis** Signs are then analyzed at the second level of meaning, namely connotation, which relates to cultural values, emotions, and social associations. The researcher interprets how signs represent meanings beyond their literal level.
- d. **Myth (Ideological) Analysis** This stage represents the highest level in Barthes' analysis, where connotative meanings are linked to ideologies or beliefs perceived as "natural" within society. Myth analysis aims to reveal how the film constructs broader narratives of struggle, including values such as success, failure, and identity.
- e. **Categorization of Struggle Meanings** The findings are classified into multidimensional categories of struggle: personal (psychological), social (relationships and stigma), and systemic (structures or institutions). This categorization strengthens the interpretation of struggle representation in the film.
- f. **Holistic Interpretation** The final stage integrates all analytical findings to construct a comprehensive understanding of the meaning of struggle in the film. Interpretation is conducted by relating the findings to social contexts and the theoretical framework employed in this study.

To ensure data validity, this study applies source and method triangulation. Source triangulation is conducted by comparing analytical findings with supporting literature and related studies, while method triangulation combines semiotic and narrative analysis to enhance interpretive validity. In addition, reflexivity is applied throughout the analytical process to minimize subjective bias.

Through these analytical techniques, this study is expected to systematically reveal how the meaning of struggle is constructed in film through a system of signs operating across multiple levels of signification.

3. Result and Discussion

This study analyzes the construction of the meaning of struggle in the film *Gran Turismo* (2023) through four key scenes representing the trajectory of the character Jann Mardenborough. The analysis applies the semiotic framework of Roland Barthes across three levels of signification: denotation, connotation, and myth.

Semiotic Analysis Table

Scene Denotation Connotation Myth			
Scene 1: Jann as a Gamer	Jann plays a racing game at home using a modest setup	Reflects limited social space and a marginal position as a gamer	The myth that “gamers are not real athletes” and lack legitimacy in professional domains
Scene 2: Entering GT Academy	Jann participates in professional racing selection and training	A transition from the virtual world to a high pressure, competitive real world environment	The myth of meritocracy: anyone can succeed if given talent and opportunity

Scene 3: The Crash	Jann experiences a racing accident and psychological distress	Represents trauma, failure, and self-doubt	The myth that failure is part of success, often oversimplified
Scene 4: Final Race	Jann competes professionally and delivers strong performance	An attempt at self-validation amid internal and social pressures	The “success story” myth that hard work inevitably leads to success

Struggle as Marginal Identity (Scene 1)



At the denotative level, the opening scene presents Jann as a gamer occupying a domestic space with gaming equipment. At the connotative level, this scene signifies his marginal position within the social structure, where gaming is often perceived as unproductive and lacking value. At the level of myth, the film both reproduces and challenges the assumption that gamers lack legitimacy in professional fields. Thus, struggle at this stage is not physical but rather an identity-based struggle for recognition.

2. Struggle within a Competitive System (Scene 2)



Jann's entry into GT Academy denotes an initial achievement. However, at the connotative level, this scene illustrates a difficult transition from the virtual world to a highly disciplined and competitive real-world environment. At the mythological level, the film constructs the ideology of meritocracy—the belief that everyone has equal opportunities to succeed. Nevertheless, the film also reveals the limitations of this system, particularly for individuals from non-traditional backgrounds such as Jann.

Struggle as Trauma and Failure (Scene 3)



The crash scene marks a crucial turning point in the narrative. Denotatively, it depicts a racing accident. Connotatively, it represents psychological trauma, guilt, and self-doubt experienced by the character. At the level of myth, the film engages with the common narrative that failure is part of the path to success. However, this study finds that the film also presents failure as a complex experience that does not always lead to immediate recovery or transformation.

Struggle as a Non-Linear Process (Scene 4)



In the final scene, Jann is portrayed as a professional racer capable of competing at a high level. Denotatively, this represents achievement. Connotatively, however, it does not signify absolute victory, but rather an ongoing process of self-validation shaped by pressure and uncertainty. At the mythological level, the film reproduces the “success story” narrative while simultaneously suggesting that success does not erase prior limitations.

Key Findings

Based on the analysis, this study finds that Jann's struggle in *Gran Turismo* is not constructed as a linear and heroic narrative, but rather as a complex, non-linear process shaped by psychological, social, and systemic constraints. In contrast to previous studies that tend to frame struggle as a form of success or resistance leading to positive outcomes, this study demonstrates that:

- Struggle can be **ambiguous and contradictory**
- Failure does not necessarily lead to **instant transformation**
- Character identity is shaped through tensions between **expectation and reality**

Therefore, the film does not merely represent struggle as achievement, but as an ongoing existential process.

4. Conclusion

This study aims to analyze the construction of the meaning of struggle in the film *Gran Turismo* (2023) through the character of Jann Mardenborough using the semiotic approach of Roland Barthes. Based on the findings, it can be concluded that the meaning of struggle in this film is not represented as a linear and heroic process, but rather as a complex and multidimensional experience.

Jann's struggle is constructed through multiple layers of meaning encompassing personal, social, and systemic dimensions. At the personal level, struggle is marked by inner conflict, trauma, and self-doubt. At the social level, it emerges in the form of stigma and societal expectations toward his identity as a gamer. Meanwhile, at the systemic level, struggle is associated with limited access and structural dominance within the professional racing world.

The findings indicate that *Gran Turismo* presents struggle as a process that does not necessarily culminate in absolute victory, but rather as a journey characterized by contradiction, uncertainty, and identity negotiation. Thus, the meaning of struggle in this film aligns more closely with an existential experience than with a simplistic success-oriented narrative.

The contribution of this study lies in advancing perspectives within media semiotics, particularly in understanding the representation of struggle as a non-singular construction of meaning. This study also extends previous research by demonstrating that struggle in popular media can be represented in a non-linear manner and does not always conform to the dominant myth of "success as the ultimate outcome."

This study is limited by the number of scenes analyzed and its focus on a single film object. Therefore, future research is recommended to examine a wider range of media texts or to employ alternative theoretical approaches in order to enrich the understanding of struggle representation within broader contexts.

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