

## John Fiske's Semiotic Analysis: Representation of Social Criticism in *Pretty Boys*

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### Abstract

*This study aims to analyze the representation of social criticism in the film *Pretty Boys* using John Fiske's semiotic analysis. In this study, the researcher used a qualitative research method with a descriptive type of research to examine a social critique that occurred in the film "Pretty Boys." In contrast, the approach used was John Fiske's semiotic approach which was used to investigate the level of reality, the level of representation, and the level of ideology. Based on the analysis, it is known that at the reality level, nine television codes represent social criticism through four scenes analyzed by the researchers, namely the display code, dress code, and makeup code—media owner. At the representation level, five television codes represent social criticism through four scenes analyzed by the researcher showing the camera code the shooting technique used is close up to show Bayu's gesture when giving an example to appear as a kemayu man to Rahmat and Anugrah, medium close up shows the player's expression, the medium shot shows the atmosphere captured by the camera and the extended photo shows the player's clothing, makeup, words, and gestures clearly. At the ideological level, it describes the existence of an ideology of capitalism which shows that media ownership is concerned with economic profit compared to the interests of the audience, with Karl Max's critical theory as a supporter and the commodification that occurs behind a media, the author concludes that there is a social criticism that arises in the *Pretty Boys* film.*

### Keywords

Semiotics; John Fiske; Criticism; Social; Film



### I. Introduction

Television shows in Indonesia are currently more concerned with popularity and ratings than educating the audience, so television programs in Indonesia are of low quality in terms of the content presented to the audience. As PESBUKERS is a program broadcast on television, it often gets reprimands from the Indonesian Broadcasting Commission; quoted from the KPI official website at the time of the event, one of the talents said harsh words, but the warning letter did not hinder the popularity and remained focused on the rating of the program. Currently, the rating is the most important thing for a schedule so that the content presented to the audience follows the latest phenomena happening in the community (Rachman et al., 2019; Gretzel & de Mendonca, 2019). Talent is someone important when the program runs; of course, talent is required to work optimally because of demands from a superior such as having to maintain the program rating to keep increasing and displaying gimmicks that can provide a different atmosphere, such as changing his identity at first to a man then becoming someone who equipped with appropriate makeup and clothing such as the role of women who will be shown to the audience because the presence of a gimmick in the current situation can increase program ratings (Hidayat & Prasetio, 2015; Simanullang, 2018). From this phenomenon, one film

discusses the problems behind the world of television, namely the *Pretty Boys* film produced by Tompi, which aired in 2019.

*Pretty Boys* tells the story of two friends who aspired to be on television since childhood and be recognized by the public because in their village if someone is in frame on tv, that person will be famous and successful. Their careers started as waiters and cooks in a restaurant. In the capital, the wages are not so great that in the end, they work in a television world that earns a lot of money and is surrounded by luxury goods. Still, when they become rich people, they are not happy because many people are hurt because of their actions. Forgetting their true identity, then pressure from the leadership, which demands them to look like a woman, is very contrary to their identity, but for the sake of money, they continue to do the job.

The *Pretty Boys* film describes the program's atmosphere hosted by Rahmat and Anugrah in the type of talk show. The presence of a talk show program is undoubtedly expected to provide information and educate the audience on every content presented. Still, in Indonesia, a program offered to the audience is often not following its function. Namely is a medium for providing information, educating, and entertaining audiences, but nowadays, it is often more concerned with commercial elements and high ratings on a program. In this case, related to commodification, Karl Max argues that commodification is an ideology that lies behind the media so that it can be interpreted as an effort to prioritize profit compared to its primary goal.

Indonesian people often express social criticism using various forms of media because the presence of media can be used as a tool to criticize the power and control of society (Kusuma & Fitriawan, 2020). Social criticism that occurs is often based on conditions that occur in the community because there are things that deviate or are not following applicable rules and norms (Warouw & Waleleng, 2021).

An example of social criticism that occurred in Indonesia regarding a television program is the type of variety show, reality show, talk show, and so on; at each television station, some things deviate because it presents concerts for the sake of high ratings and seeks to get more profit by doing various ways to make it easier for people to see the program is still running so that in this case the actors or actresses are required to do everything possible by changing their true identity so that a program can be accepted and attract the attention of the public to faithfully watch the program (Kusumastuti & Nugroho, 2017; Pinontoan, 2020). The presence of a talk show program is undoubtedly expected to provide information and educate audiences on any content that is presented. Still, in Indonesia, often a program that is given to the audience is not following its function, namely as a medium to provide information, educate and entertain audiences but nowadays, it is often more concerned with commercial elements and high ratings on a program (Marwantika, 2021; Noad & Barton, 2020). In this case, related to commodification, Karl Max argues that commodification is an ideology that lies behind the media so that it can be interpreted as an effort to prioritize profit compared to its primary goal.

Film in Indonesia, along with the development of the times, of course, in terms of quality and the content of the message conveyed by filmmakers to the public, can be well received. The film can be seen as a work of human creation in which there is an aesthetic element, or it can also be seen as a medium of communication, where the film can be used as a medium to channel messages from filmmakers to the public (Rahayu, 2020; Nurhayati, 2018). Messages are conveyed to the public through visual films accompanied by audio and musical illustrations that can support the atmosphere of the scene so that the audience can receive the message well because the filming is produced in a mature and

detailed manner with a long duration so that the audience can receive the message conveyed adequately.

Of course, the production of a film about social criticism aims to criticize someone in the hope of bringing about change, and the audience can take a positive message in the movie. The film is one of the essential things of communication; the film is one type of mass media that is one-way, which functions to convey messages, entertain and educate a broad audience (Andini & Putri, 2019). The presence of the film can reach the social segmentation of society widely and can influence it. The film contains many signs, which are included in various sign systems that work well together to achieve the expected effect (Setiawan et al., 2020).

In this case, it is related to the critical theory behind the emergence of capitalism; as said by Ziauddin Sardar in the book *Post-commodification Media* that capitalism is a relationship that occurs in the economic system that connects workers, commodities, time, and wages that are produced inappropriately. As in the *Pretty Boys* film, which describes an atmosphere that emphasizes profit for the company, such as pursuing a high rating on a program, of course, the workers who seek to meet the needs of the company by risking their identity, energy, family, time and so on to survive and earn income, but with all the efforts made by the workers it is not following the collective agreement.

The interest of a television company to make a profit requires workers to perform as much as possible. In *Pretty Boys*, the talents are needed to change their identity to become a transvestite (women, men) because, with this display, they can attract the audience's attention and increase the program's rating. In this case, related to hegemony, Sungkar et al. (2016) and Tazkiyyah & Wulan (2017) explain that hegemony is a form of expression, a way of applying a rule that is carried out to maintain and develop themselves through victim compliance which can influence and shape their mindset.

*Pretty Boys* is a comedy genre film, the director of this film invites the audience to think about the values contained in the movie so that the positive side can be taken by delivering messages through humorous dialogue; of course, the making of this film aims to criticize someone who is working in the television world to provide entertainment for the audience. the audience but after behind the scenes, of course, there are many problems regarding the life of a public figure.

Researchers are interested in examining the social criticism in several scenes of the *Pretty Boys* film produced by Anami Films, *The Pretty Boys Pictures*, and directed by Tompi prioritizes the convenience of talent. Based on information quoted from the online media *Tirto.Id*, Imam Darto, a researcher for the *Pretty Boys* film script, said, "we want to highlight how behind television, because that's the ecosystem behind the scenes, from the audience coordinator, then to the artist, then contagious. to the artist, that's right." The filming wanted to emphasize that someone appears on television because of a demand that must be followed; if they are not followed, they will not be famous.

To analyze this research, the semiotics used is John Fiske's semiotics because the semiotic theory follows research conducted by researchers who study films related to television programs in Indonesia; in this theory, Fiske focuses on a television program that is used as a text and has a role in examining the socio-cultural layers that exist in society (Haqqu & Promonojati, 2022). Fiske argues semiotics is a science that studies the signs and meanings of a sign system; the character is used to analyze how a sign and meaning can be constructed in a text on the media or the study of how a movement from a type of work that is present in society to communicate a message meaning.

Based on this, the researchers conducted research on the Pretty Boys film because, in this film, there are phenomena that can be studied further and deepen social criticism; of course, the reader can assess the meaning that can be taken in the film with the level of reality, representation, and ideology.

## **II. Review of Literature**

### **2.1 Mass Communication**

Mass communication or mass communication is disseminating information through mass media; mass communication must use mass media, communication can be conveyed to many audiences, communication media including mass media are radio broadcasts and television both known as electronic media, newspapers, and magazines are both called with print media, as well as film media, films used as mass communication media are cinema films (Utomo et al., 2018)) The media in question is a connecting tool to convey information from the sender in the form of messages to the recipients of news that everyone can access, such as viewing, listen, interpret, read the statement conveyed.

### **2.2 Film and its Function in Mass Communication**

According to Law Number 33 of 2009 concerning Film, Chapter 1 Article 1 states that films are works of art and culture which are social institutions and mass communication media made based on cinematographic rules with or without sound can be shown. The film is categorized as mass communication because it uses mass media to convey information to a broad audience; in each country, the meaning of the film is undoubtedly different, such as in Germany, where a film or film means relating to film and the world around it, in Greece film is known as cinema, tho stands for cinematography which means painting motion with light. In English, the term film is moving or live images (Pah & Darmastuti, 2019).

### **2.3 Semiotics John Fiske**

In communication science, semiotics is a science that studies signs or signals in a broad communication context so that it involves elements of communication. According to Nawiroh Vera, semiotics is a science of analyzing signs and symbols used to interact; in communication science, a process of delivering messages to be received effectively requires a process of interpretation of the messages conveyed so that humans can create and interpret symbols until now it has developed into semiology. Naldi & Nugroho, 2021).

According to Little John, the development of semiotics as a study at the Vienna Circle meeting, a group of scholars presented a work entitled "international Encyclopedia" so that semiotics can be grouped into three parts as follows: a) Semantics, which studies how a sign is related to another; b) Synthetics, which studies how a sign has meaning with other signs; and c) Pragmatics, which studies how a sign is used in everyday life. John Fiske argues that semiotics is a science or an analytical method for studying signs; the sign is a tool used by humans to find a way in this world, amid humans, and with humans (Maulati & Prasetio, 2017).

According to him, semiotics focuses on a sign; in this case, there are three main focuses: a) The character itself. An understanding of the various types of symptoms, how signs can appear, and how a movement can relate to someone who uses the sign so that, in this case, a character can be understood by how humans can use the sign; b) Code. An understanding of how code is developed to meet the needs of a society or a culture that utilizes available communication channels to transmit the code; and c) Culture. This

understanding puts a legend and a sign can work, but depending on the use of the code for existence and a form of its own (Ari & Oki, 2021).

### III. Research Method

In this study, the researcher used a qualitative research method with a descriptive type of research to examine a social criticism in the film "Pretty Boys." In contrast, the approach used was the John Fiske semiotic approach which was used to investigate the level of reality, the level of representation, and the level of ideology in the film. In "Pretty Boys," the researcher does the activity of watching the movie, understanding the film, and collecting scenes that can represent a social criticism that occurs in the movie. The type of data used is primary data collected through scene cuts. In contrast, secondary data is collected through literature study methods in connection with the film to be analyzed, the unit of analysis in the research conducted by the researcher in the study of semiotics in the form of an audio and visual scene.

### IV. Results and Discussion

In this study, the researcher will explain the cut scenes which, according to the researcher, describe social criticism in the Pretty Boys film. The researcher chooses four locations to be studied using John Fiske's semiotic theory. The explanation will be presented in several film scenes, which are given as follows:

#### a. Reality Level

There is a cut first scene showing a person in charge of the audience named Roni giving directions to the paid audience to perform optimally and bring a lively and cheerful atmosphere so that it appears that the event can entertain the audience. After the program is over, Rahmat and Anugrah are slowly climbing the stairs while talking about the wages of being a paid audience to Roni in a talk show program entitled Kembang Gula; in that scene, it was done the backstage to meet the producer, they hurriedly entered the producer's room, then showed their expressions for being the first paid audience and when hear the answer from the person in charge of the event regarding payments that are not made directly. There are several codes in this level of reality which are presented in the following table:

**Table 1.** Reality level division in scene one

Code	Explanation
Display Code	Scene one shows two friends named Rahmat and Anugrah, who come from a village, coming to be paid viewers on a talk show program for the first time; the appearance of the two people looks simple with skin looking tan, wearing casual clothes and strap shoes and his hair black.
Dress Code	In this scene, Rahmat is seen wearing a blue t-shirt with a black collar and a jacket that looks like a white parachute with a combination of blue on the zipper and the inside of the coat, then he wears blue jeans and wears laces black.
Makeup Code	Makeup in the scene shows a talent using natural makeup such as foundation and powder matching the talent's skin color. The use of makeup is the most crucial part of the film.

How to Speak Code	The scene begins when Roni gives directions to the paid audience so that they do their job well; Roni's way of speaking is evident with a passionate and soft voice intonation that can convince the audience that he is only giving false hopes to the paid audience to raise their spirits with providing incorrect information.
Code of Conduct	The scene shows several people paying serious attention to the orders given by Roni so that the paid audience can do their job to the fullest. Rahmat and Anugrah look enthusiastic about listening to and believing Roni's words without finding out the truth.
Environmental Code	The environmental code in the scene shows the situation in the seats of the paid audience, in a very closed condition and illuminated by lighting, which indicates that they are in a studio; then, in the next scene, Rahmat, Anugrah, and Roni are seen on a ladder leading to the producer's room. A black cloth covered the access wall to the room, and several crew members were seen busy tidying up the studio.
Gesture Code	In this scene, a conversation takes place on the stairs leading to the producer's room. Anugrah holds the fence while watching the exchange between Rahmat and Roni. In front of the producer's room door, Anugrah has Rahmat's shoulder because of doubts about the decision given by Roni as the person in charge of the audience.
Expression Code	When discussing wages as paid viewers, Roni, Rahmat, and Anugrah showed confused and happy faces because they were the first paid viewers and won the quiz on the program. At the same time, Roni looked delighted and amazed because Rahmat and Anugrah managed to entertain the audience. so the program followed the producer's desire to get a high rating.
Voice Code	The sound code is there when Roni gives directions to the audience to do their job well; along with that, there is cheerful background music that adapts to the crowd situation in the studio.

Source: data proceed

Based on the explanation above, the level of reality contained in this scene uses a display code and clothing that shows their clothing when they first appear on a television program. The makeup code used is seen using natural makeup according to skin color and the scene in the scene. The way they talk sounds like people who obey orders without arguing. Rahmat and Anugrah's code of behavior looks enthusiastic because they can realize their childhood dreams of appearing on television programs. Environmental codes can be seen happening in a broadcast studio and backstage when they are about to approach the producer. In the program, the gesture code looks like they are enjoying the moment for the first time they are in a television broadcasting studio; the expression code shows that they are confused and happy because they didn't expect that they could appear on a television program and the voice code there was a crowd in a television studio.

## b. Representation Level

The level of representation is presented in the following table:

**Table 2.** The division of representation levels in the movie scene

Code	Explanation
Camera Code	The camera code in this scene shows that taking pictures in these two scenes uses the extended shot technique because it can invite the audience to focus and see the settings being used and use a low-angle shooting angle so that the object is seen as a whole. In the scene performed by the talent, the background of the atmosphere is backstage in the producer's room with minimal lighting, and there is a ladder and black cloth used to cover the wall.
Lighting Code	The lighting code in the scene shows the situation in a studio that lacks light, so it uses lighting so that the atmosphere in the studio can see the location and dialogue performed by the talent. The lighting used is frontal lighting which is used to emphasize an object.
Dialog Code	In this scene, Rahmat, Anugrah, and Roni are seen on a ladder that will enter the producer's room, a step is heard when climbing the stairs, but in the middle of the road, it stops because there is a dialogue between Rahmat and Roni.
Setting Code	The setting code in Roni's scene gives directions to the audience; the seats are neatly occupied by the audience, which is divided into two parts; then, in the next scene, when the crew asks Roni, the Kembang Gula stage setting is covered with colorful paint with a plaid motif, then equipped with led lights with the words Kembang Gula, in the last scene Rahmat and Anugrah are seen heading to the producer's room.

Source: data proceed

Based on the explanation above, the level of representation in this scene uses camera codes, lighting, dialogue, and settings to show the behind-the-scenes atmosphere of a television program. Still, in this scene, there is no visible conflict.

## c. Reality Level

The cut scene shows Rahmat, Anugrah, Roni, and Bayu as producers of the talk show Kembang Gula in the room discussing an agreement to become co-hosts on the program. Still, the producer wants them to change their identity to become a kemayu because of kemayu's appearance on the plan can entertain the audience and increase the rating. When they heard the offer, it could be seen from their confused expressions while crossing their fingers on the table.

**Table 3.** The division of reality levels in the movie scene

Code	Explanation
Display Code	In the scene showing a conversation that took place in the Kembang Gula producer's room, Anugrah and Rahmat were seen paying attention to the rules given by Bayu when they agreed to an agreement to become co-hosts, the conversation took place in a room, and they stared at Bayu, sitting on a chair, Rahmat looks. Anugrah was confused and immediately agreed to an agreement without thinking about the impact of the offer.
Dress Code	In this scene, Rahmat, Anugrah, and Roni are wearing the same clothes as in the previous stage, but Bayu is wearing a black shirt, the shirt's collar is raised, and the shirt's sleeves are folded.
Makeup Code	The makeup or makeup is the same as in the previous scene, using natural makeup such as foundation, powder, and so on.
How to Speak Code	The code for how to speak in the scene is through the sentence "You have to maintain your unch character." Bayu gave directions to Rahmat and Anugrah to look like kemayu men. Anugrah answered, "Huh?" which shows that he was taken aback by Bayu's request, without giving him any chance to negotiate about their exaggerated style of appearance
Code of Conduct	The scene shows Rahmat and Anugrah being in the producer's room; they are paying attention to Bayu's words that he wants them to be the program hosts and clenching their fists because Bayu gave a request without discussing and hearing their opinion.
Expression Code	The environmental code shows that they are in a room equipped with decorative lamps, paintings, wall decorations, tables and chairs, and stationery.
Voice Code	In that scene, there are several movements made by Rahmat and Anugrah, namely when Anugrah folded her fingers on the table because she was paying attention to the rules that they would agree upon to be the co-hosts of Kembang Gula. While tucking her fingers, Anugrah could be seen from the eyes of Anugrah and Rahmat, who were surprised because Bayu's wish for them to appear differently.

Source: data proceed

Based on the explanation above, the researcher chose all television codes contained in John Fiske's reality level to analyze the social criticism that occurred in the Pretty Boys film because these codes can describe the current situation and show the demands made by producers for commercial purposes.

#### **d. Ideology Level**

At the ideological level, the researcher focuses on research related to social criticism in the Pretty Boys film; in this case, from the four scenes that have been studied, there are social criticisms that arise when Roni as the person in charge of the paid audience has given false hopes and lied about an artist who At first he was a paid spectator until now he is successful and has a prestigious trophy, Roni's words are indeed very hopeful for those who want to appear as television hosts and be recognized by the public. Still, Roni's goal is to make them laugh like a comedy. It worked. Then when Bayu forced them to do the



gimmick of being a kemayu man by using makeup and women's clothing, of course, with that appearance, the program rating increased.

In the opinion of the researcher, based on the film, which depicts the struggle of Rahmat and Anugrah, who came from a remote village, to be able to appear in a big city to be a television host, of course, this is their dream since childhood. Still, they do not understand that there are good and bad things to being someone famous on TV; in the village, they think that if someone appears on a television show, of course, they are a successful person. Still, it turns out that the producer's demands to maintain the rating by doing the gimmick to be a woman who can entertain the audience; of course, it puts pressure on the talents who run their daily lives by risking their identity and family feel so that it can illustrate social criticism that they carry out their work excessively because they think that gimmicks that change their appearance to look like a woman can undoubtedly embarrass themselves. The show and the paid viewers are, of course, done unfairly, and the wages are not appropriate. Still, they often have to keep a cheerful atmosphere and a producer who always demands talent to increase the program's rating without paying attention and listening to his opinion personally.

This *Pretty Boys* film shows the ideology of capitalism that occurs in several scenes of social criticism because it can show that owners of capital can do anything to get as much profit as possible without prioritizing right and wrong. The economic condition of the population is a condition that describes human life that has economic score (Shah et al, 2020). Capitalism is a relationship in an economic system that links workers, commodities, time, and wages that are produced inappropriately. In the film, the company demands talent to do a gimmick to become a kemayu man with makeup and clothing like a woman because this appearance can increase program ratings, and the public is enthusiastic about their totality. The world of television in Indonesia is currently not educating its people because the content provided tends to emphasize entertainment elements that contain gimmicks and corporate profits so that it is included in commodification; Karl Max argues that commodification is an ideology that lies behind the media so that it can be interpreted as an effort to prioritize profit alone compared to the primary goal.

The presence of social criticism is, of course, to express everything that happens in society but is considered inappropriate for a person; social criticism can be expressed in various ways, such as through song lyrics, poetry, films, and so on; the purpose of social criticism is, of course, to provide awareness, build and improve problems that are happening in the environment. The critical theory offers a view to making people aware of the root of the problem so that people are aware that they are being oppressed.

This *Pretty Boys* film shows a media situation where the rulers or company owners are more concerned with commercial elements than the conditions of the workers. The primary purpose of the presence of television programs is to educate, provide information and entertain so that it includes capitalism which is an economic system that can reduce property rights for people workers, produce a commodity for the benefit of the owners of capital so that the item becomes a means of production and workers' time is paid the wages grown. At the same time, it can be related to a political system or a way of exercising power and exploitation of workers.

## V. Conclusion

Based on the analysis, it is known that at the reality level, nine television codes represent social criticism through four scenes analyzed by the researchers, namely the display code, dress code, and makeup code—media owner. At the representation level, five television codes represent social criticism through four scenes analyzed by the researcher showing the camera code the shooting technique used is close up to show Bayu's gesture when giving an example to appear as a kemayu man to Rahmat and Anugrah, medium close up shows the player's expression, the medium shot shows the atmosphere caught on camera and the extended photo shows the player's clothing, makeup, words, and gestures clearly. At the ideological level, it describes the existence of an ideology of capitalism which shows that media ownership is concerned with economic profit compared to the interests of the audience, with Karl Max's critical theory as a supporter and the commodification that occurs behind a media, the author concludes that there is a social criticism that arises in the *Pretty Boys* film.

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