

UNIVERSITI TEKNOLOGI MARA

**SIGNS AND SYNTAX: AN APPROACH TO
PANELS READING FROM
FILMS TO COMICS**

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ABSTRACT

Both film and comics have enjoyed reputation in the public reception for being so readily accessible. While comparatively both formats have different attribute, – the film usually more temporal, the comics is more spatial- yet they share one distinctive feature that makes them so easily palatable: the elevation of the visual pleasure. This distinction can be understood and analyzed deeper by using *semiotics*. Semiotics is a study of sign, and sometimes seen as the science of sign system in any culture that have created, maintained and reproduced the signs. This thesis offers a *semiotics analysis* of comics' panels by using the platform of the semiology by Ferdinand de Saussure (one of the founding fathers of semiotics theory) and the film semiotics of Christian Metz, where in the end, I propose that *the panels in comics are like shots in the film, and are structured like a language*. This scheme is in rhyme with all the structuralist (and post-structuralist) positions (like the critics Levi Strauss and Roland Barthes, for example) in reading culture and social convention as akin to the structural linguistic. Notably, the objective of the thesis is not only a survey on the concept of semiotics analysis but also to build a semiotics theory based from Metz's own *Grand Syntagmatique*. The methods of Metz's approach in reading and analyzing film shots found in *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema* (1974) are used as the framework for the argument. By the end, I put forward a proper semiotics strategies referred as *spatio-sequence* (based from Metz's *Grand Syntagmatique*) for comics analysis. Two texts – Jeff Smith's *Bone* and Rejabhad's *Sebuah Rumah di Tepi Sungai* – are chosen as case studies to demonstrate the argument of *spatio-sequence*. From there weakness and strength of *spatio-sequence* is brought to light and reviewed. I conclude, through the case studies, that the *spatio-sequence* offer alternative and concise way to read the possible syntagm the panels operated and arranged in comics, which can ultimately, present new stratagem in comics theory.

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I dedicate this thesis to the memory of the French film theorist, Christian Metz (1931-1993).

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Preface

As we can see, film and comics share the same narrative and pictorial images. In fact, in this thesis, I will work out a solution on how panels in comics' panel work like films' frame in constructing themselves as *syntax*. Yet, it needs to be mentioned that films work with time as much as comics works with space. Since film and comics contribute to our important understanding of media nowadays, it is crucial to undermine both *medium* to see how far the advancing theory and criticism in semiotics (especially so in comics) has progressed. In term of critical theory, film has an edge towards comics. There have been more film studies in the academic circle compared to the comics readings. This happen to be because the comics are always looked as an inferior, not just to film, but also to the arts like literature and painting. The only way to remedy the situation is to either *create* more critically-acclaimed comics or to *write* about the comics according to the theoretical stance one opted for the other "Great Arts". Here, I chose the later recourse.

Yet, we ask ourselves thus: How can we criticize the comics academically when the comics themselves are seen as merely another trash unfitting for the 'enlightened eyes'? In what possible way can we read and analyze comics? True, there are many academic writings out there that attempt to downplay the role of comics in modern society (the notorious *Seduction of the Innocent* by Dr. Fredric Wertham, 1954, comes to mind) yet there are as many researchers like Thierry Groensteen (1999), McCloud (1993), Neil McCohn (2005) who, nevertheless, unceasingly, provide the comics with its critical reception it needed.

What is so special about comics is that the medium offer more than what it seems. On the surface we can open up a comic book, read and proceed with our life. Should the story was good, we might be compelled to buy its sequel or just