



Denotative, Connotative, and Myth in The Nun II: A Semiotic Analysis of Supernatural Communication in Religious Horror Cinema

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Article Info	Abstract
Received: 2026-05-07 Revised: 2026-06-04 Accepted: 2026-06-30 Keywords: Semiotics; Roland Barthes; Denotative; Connotative; Myth; The Nun II; Horror Film; Religious Ideology. DOI: 10.24256/ideas.v14i1.10480 Corresponding Author: Nizmawati Amran nysmaahyari017@gmail.com English Language Education Study Program, Faculty of Letters and Culture Universitas Negeri Gorontalo	<i>This study analyzes the denotative, connotative, and mythical meanings embedded in the communication between human characters and supernatural beings in The Nun II (2023), a religious horror film produced by Warner Bros. Pictures as part of The Conjuring Universe. Employing Roland Barthes' semiotic theory as the primary analytical framework, this research adopts a qualitative descriptive method to examine twenty selected scenes from the film. Data were collected through systematic observation and documentation of visual symbols, dialogues, sound effects, and cinematic elements. Analysis was conducted across three levels of signification: denotation, connotation, and myth. At the denotative level, the film presents literal depictions of supernatural phenomena, including possessions, apparitions, whispers, distorted religious symbols, and sacred relics. At the connotative level, these signs acquire culturally constructed meanings associated with spiritual vulnerability, divine protection, fear, and moral resistance. At the mythological level, the film systematically naturalizes the ideological belief that religious faith constitutes the ultimate power against supernatural evil. The findings reveal that possession functions as the most recurrent semiotic strategy, reinforcing the ideological message that spiritual weakness renders humans susceptible to demonic influence. Binary oppositions—light versus darkness, silence versus sound, isolation versus community—structure the film's entire semiotic system and consistently resolve in favor of divine authority. Furthermore, the inversion of the nun's sacred</i>

image into a demonic figure constructs a powerful mythological statement about the corruption of sanctity. This study concludes that The Nun II functions not merely as entertainment but as a culturally coded text that disseminates religious ideology through cinematic signs. The research confirms the continued relevance of Barthes' semiotic theory in analyzing ideological meaning-making within contemporary popular media.

1. Introduction

Language and sign systems constitute the foundational instruments through which human beings construct, transmit, and negotiate meaning across diverse contexts and media. In contemporary cultural production, meaning is rarely conveyed through purely verbal or linguistic channels; rather, it emerges from the interplay of visual, auditory, and symbolic elements that collectively operate as semiotic systems. Semiotics, as the scientific study of signs and their meanings, offers a comprehensive framework for analyzing how meaning is produced and interpreted across various forms of cultural expression (Eco, 1979; Chandler, 2017). Within this discipline, Roland Barthes' tripartite model of signification—encompassing denotation, connotation, and myth—has proven particularly influential in revealing how cultural texts encode ideological messages beneath the surface of literal representation (Barthes, 1972).

The horror film genre represents a compelling arena for semiotic investigation. Unlike other cinematic genres, horror relies extensively on symbolic communication, psychological tension, and the manipulation of cultural codes to evoke fear and emotional engagement. Religious horror films employ an elaborate system of signs—including sacred objects, supernatural manifestations, and ritualistic practices—to construct layered meanings that operate simultaneously at emotional, cultural, and ideological levels (Cherry, 2009). These films do not merely depict fear; they encode theological narratives, moral ideologies, and cultural beliefs about the nature of evil, faith, and spiritual authority.

The Nun II (2023), directed by Michael Chaves and produced as part of *The Conjuring Universe* by Warner Bros. Pictures, represents a paradigmatic example of contemporary religious horror cinema. Set in 1956, the film follows Sister Irene, a Catholic nun who is summoned by the Church to investigate a series of mysterious deaths at a convent in France. The central antagonist, Valak—a demonic entity manifesting in the form of a nun—pursues a sacred relic to amplify its supernatural powers.

The conflict between Irene, as the representative of divine faith, and Valak, as the embodiment of demonic evil, provides the narrative structure through which the film constructs its semiotic system. This binary opposition between good and evil, faith and corruption, light and darkness constitute the ideological core of the film's communicative architecture.

The significance of *The Nun II* as an object of semiotic study lies in its rich and systematic deployment of religious signs. The film's visual lexicon includes inverted crosses, sacred relics, candlelight, nun's habits, and ecclesiastical architecture. Its auditory dimension encompasses supernatural whispers, prayers, incantations, and dissonant sound effects. Verbally, the film utilizes religious dialogue, prayers of exorcism, and demonic utterances that function as semiotic mediators between the human and supernatural realms. Each of these elements operates simultaneously at the levels of denotation, connotation, and myth, making the film particularly amenable to Barthesian analysis.

The theoretical relevance of Roland Barthes' semiotics to this study is threefold. First, Barthes' concept of denotation allows the researcher to establish the literal, observable layer of meaning in each selected scene, providing the empirical foundation for analysis. Second, the concept of connotation enables the identification of culturally specific meanings that signs acquire through their association with religious, social, and psychological codes. Barthes (1991) argues that connotation is never arbitrary but is shaped by the dominant cultural codes of a given society, making it a powerful tool for understanding how films communicate beyond the literal. Third, and most significantly, Barthes' concept of myth allows the researcher to interrogate the ideological dimensions of the film—specifically, how certain cultural beliefs about faith, evil, and divine authority are naturalized and presented as universal truths (Barthes, 1972).

Previous scholarship has applied Barthes' semiotic framework to various cultural texts, including horror film posters (Awwaliyah, 2024), Korean drama series (Sabrina et al., 2023), and teen films addressing social issues (Fatimah & Wiranwanda, 2023). However, systematic semiotic analysis of Western religious horror films, particularly in terms of the audiovisual construction of supernatural communication, remains limited.

Most existing studies focus either exclusively on visual symbolism or on connotative meanings, neglecting the mythological dimension that Barthes considered the most ideologically significant level of signification. Furthermore, the role of auditory and verbal signs—such as prayers, whispers, and religious invocations—as semiotic mediators between humans and supernatural beings has received insufficient scholarly attention.

This study addresses these gaps by conducting a comprehensive Barthesian semiotic analysis of twenty selected scenes from *The Nun II*. The research examines how denotation, connotation, and myth collectively construct a coherent ideological system centered on the themes of spiritual warfare, divine authority,

and the eternal conflict between good and evil. By integrating visual, verbal, and auditory dimensions of analysis, the study offers a holistic understanding of how horror cinema functions as a vehicle for cultural and ideological communication.

The research is guided by the following question: How are denotative, connotative, and mythical meanings constructed through the communication between human characters and supernatural beings in *The Nun II*? The objective is to elaborate the three levels of signification as they operate within the film's semiotic system, thereby demonstrating the relevance and applicability of Barthes' theory to contemporary religious horror cinema. The study contributes to the academic fields of semiotics, film studies, and cultural criticism by providing a detailed analysis of how popular media encodes and disseminates ideological meaning through cinematic signs.

Academically, this research strengthens the position of Barthes' semiotic theory as a multidisciplinary analytical framework applicable to modern audiovisual media. Socially and culturally, it serves as a critical examination of how religious ideology is naturalized through popular entertainment—a matter of increasing relevance given the global reach of franchises such as *The Conjuring Universe* and their influence on public perceptions of religion, the supernatural, and moral authority.

2. Method

This study employs a qualitative descriptive research design, which is appropriate for the systematic interpretation of meaning within cultural texts (Moleong, 2010; Creswell, 2014). The qualitative approach enables the researcher to engage in in-depth analysis of semiotic phenomena without reducing complex sign systems to quantifiable variables. Descriptive methodology allows the findings to be presented as rich, contextual interpretations of meaning grounded in specific scenes, dialogues, and cinematic elements.

The primary theoretical framework is Roland Barthes' semiotic theory, specifically his tripartite model of signification: denotation, connotation, and myth. This framework was selected because of its demonstrated capacity to reveal layered ideological meanings in visual and popular media texts (Barthes, 1972, 1977, 1991). Barthes' theory is particularly suited to religious horror films, which combine literal visual events with culturally coded symbolic meanings and broader ideological narratives.

The data source is the film *The Nun II* (2023), directed by Michael Chaves and distributed by Warner Bros. Pictures. The film constitutes the primary data corpus. Secondary data were drawn from academic literature on semiotics, horror film studies, and cultural theory, including works by Barthes, Chandler, Hall, Fiske, and Monaco. The research period extended from October 2024 to June 2025.

Data collection was conducted in three stages. In the first stage, the researcher conducted systematic observations of the film through repeated viewings to identify scenes containing significant supernatural communication. During these viewings, all relevant dialogues were transcribed and key frames were documented through screenshots. In the second stage, identified scenes and signs were classified according to Barthes' three levels of signification.

Verbal signs (dialogue, prayers, incantations), visual signs (crosses, robes, light, spatial elements), and auditory signs (whispers, sound effects, music) were each catalogued separately. In the third and final stage, formal semiotic analysis was conducted, applying Barthesian concepts to interpret each data point across all three levels.

The data analysis procedure followed a sequential logic: beginning with denotative identification of each sign's literal meaning, proceeding to connotative interpretation of its culturally associated meanings, and culminating in mythological analysis of the ideological narratives it naturalizes. This three-stage process was applied consistently across all twenty selected data points, ensuring systematic and comparable analysis. Inter-textual references to religious iconography, cultural codes, and cinematic conventions were drawn upon to support connotative and mythological interpretations. Validity was enhanced through triangulation of visual, verbal, and auditory data, as well as alignment with established theoretical frameworks and relevant previous studies.

3. Results

The analysis of twenty selected scenes from *The Nun II* reveals a complex and systematically organized semiotic structure that operates across the three levels of signification defined by Roland Barthes. The findings are organized according to recurring semiotic categories: supernatural manifestations, religious symbols, spatial and environmental signs, character confrontations, and narrative resolution.

At the denotative level, the film presents a series of observable visual, verbal, and auditory events. Sister Irene is depicted experiencing a disturbing dream in which Valak communicates a supernatural warning. Maurice, who serves as a secondary protagonist, is shown speaking in an altered voice and exhibiting uncontrolled physical behavior during scenes of possession. Valak appears in the physical form of a distorted nun, with hollow eyes, decaying skin, and a black habit. A hallway scene depicts an audible whisper with no visible source calling Irene's name. Sacred relics are discovered and physically handled by characters. Candles are extinguished without apparent physical cause.

A church burns under unexplained circumstances. Mirrors display distorted reflections inconsistent with physical reality. A prayer circle is formed by a group of nuns. A confrontation scene presents Irene and Valak facing each other directly. The final scene depicts a restoration of calm following the climax. These twenty data points constitute the denotative foundation of the analysis, providing the

literal visual and auditory content from which subsequent meanings are constructed.

At the connotative level, the signs acquire culturally coded meanings shaped primarily by Christian religious conventions and horror genre conventions. Sister Irene's dream connotes supernatural warning and prophetic communication, suggesting that divine or demonic forces operate through unconscious channels. Maurice's possession connotes spiritual vulnerability and the susceptibility of human consciousness to demonic manipulation when faith is weakened. Valak's nun form connotes the desecration of religious purity: the habit and veil, culturally associated with holiness and devotion, are inverted into symbols of terror and corruption. The whisper without physical source connotes psychological destabilization and invisible demonic surveillance.

The extinguished candle connotes temporary spiritual darkness and the withdrawal of divine protection. The burning church connotes catastrophic desecration and the direct assault of evil upon sacred space. The distorted mirror connotes identity disruption and the demonic manipulation of perceived reality. The prayer circle connotes collective spiritual resistance and communal faith as a defensive force. The direct confrontation between Irene and Valak connotes moral courage and the willingness to face evil as an act of faith. Light breaking through a darkened space connotes divine intervention and the reassertion of spiritual authority. The final calm scene connotes narrative and spiritual resolution, symbolizing the triumph of order over chaos.

The most frequently recurring connotative pattern in the analysis is the use of possession as a primary medium of supernatural communication. Across multiple scenes, Valak communicates through Maurice's body, using his voice, gestures, and physical form as a semiotic channel. This repetition indicates that the film's primary strategy for constructing verbal supernatural communication is the bodily invasion of a human host. The connotative implication is that demonic entities require human vessels to communicate in the material world, reinforcing the ideological message that spiritual weakness creates openings for supernatural influence.

A second significant connotative pattern involves the systematic opposition of light and darkness. Across the twenty analyzed data points, light consistently appears in association with divine presence, spiritual protection, and hope, while darkness is associated with demonic activity, fear, and moral corruption. This pattern is most explicitly realized in the scenes depicting the extinguished candle, the burning church, and the light breaking through darkened space. Auditory signs also follow this oppositional logic: silence connotes strategic demonic preparation and imminent threat, while prayers and collective vocalizations connote communal resistance and divine invocation.

At the mythological level, the film constructs and naturalizes three dominant ideological narratives. The first and most pervasive is the myth of the eternal battle between good and evil. This myth is constructed through the repeated binary opposition of Irene and Valak as representative figures of divine faith and demonic corruption respectively. Through narrative progression—from vulnerability to resistance to restoration—the film encodes a theological structure that presents faith as the inevitable victor in spiritual conflict. This narrative is not presented as culturally specific but as universal and timeless, functioning precisely as Barthes describes myth: as ideology disguised as natural truth.

The second dominant myth is the belief that supernatural beings communicate through dreams, possession, and apparitions. The film presents these forms of communication as culturally legitimate and morally meaningful, normalizing the idea that the spiritual world actively intervenes in human experience. The third myth concerns the power of sacred objects. Relics, crosses, and candlelight are repeatedly presented as instruments of divine protection, constructing the ideological belief that holiness is materially inscribed in physical objects and that these objects constitute effective defenses against supernatural evil.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study confirm that *The Nun II* functions as a richly structured semiotic system in which denotation, connotation, and myth operate interdependently to construct ideological meanings about faith, evil, and spiritual authority. This discussion interprets the findings in relation to Barthes' theoretical framework and situates them within the broader context of horror film studies and cultural semiotics.

The denotative layer of the film provides the narrative and perceptual foundation upon which deeper meanings are built. As Chandler (2017) notes, denotation constitutes the primary semiological system through which audiences first engage with a text. In *The Nun II*, the denotative events—possession, apparition, supernatural whispers, sacred relics, and environmental disturbances—are presented with sufficient visual and auditory specificity to function as credible perceptual objects. This specificity is significant because it grounds the film's symbolic operations in observable reality, making the subsequent connotative and mythological meanings appear natural rather than constructed. The precision of the film's denotative layer thus facilitates the ideological work of the mythological layer.

The connotative dimension reveals the cultural codes through which the film's signs acquire significance beyond their literal content. Barthes (1977) argues that connotation operates through culturally internalized codes that connect signs to social values, emotions, and ideological positions.

In *The Nun II*, the dominant cultural code is Christian religious symbolism, through which objects such as crosses and relics, gestures such as prayer, and spatial arrangements such as the church acquire their connotative meanings.

This code is not universal—it presupposes cultural familiarity with Catholic iconography and theology—yet within the film's ideological system, it is presented as if it were. This is a classic operation of myth as Barthes understands it: the transformation of culturally specific meanings into apparently natural and universal truths.

The role of possession as the primary medium of supernatural verbal communication deserves particular theoretical attention. Possession in the film operates as what Monaco (2009) calls a complex audiovisual sign: it combines visual signs (physical alteration of the host body), auditory signs (distorted voice), and narrative signs (disruption of character continuity) to produce a layered semiotic event. At the connotative level, possession communicates spiritual vulnerability and the permeability of human consciousness to demonic influence.

At the mythological level, it naturalizes the ideological belief that human beings are perpetually at risk of demonic invasion when their faith is weakened. This myth reinforces a theological anthropology in which the human body is a contested site between divine and demonic forces—a narrative that recurs across religious horror cinema and reflects deep-seated cultural anxieties about autonomy, spiritual integrity, and the boundaries of the self.

The binary opposition between light and darkness constitutes the film's most structurally pervasive semiotic system. Barthes (1977) argues that meaning is frequently structured through oppositional relationships in which signs acquire value through their differences from other signs. In *The Nun II*, this binary is not merely visual but operates across multiple semiotic registers: spatial (sacred versus profane space), auditory (prayer versus silence), narrative (Irene versus Valak), and temporal (restoration following disruption). The consistent resolution of these oppositions in favor of light, faith, and divine order naturalizes the ideological conviction that goodness is not merely stronger than evil but that its triumph is inevitable. This mythological construction aligns with what Hall (2013) identifies as the hegemonic function of representation: the naturalization of dominant cultural values as self-evident truths.

The inversion of the nun's sacred image into the demonic figure of Valak represents one of the film's most sophisticated semiotic operations. A nun's habit is culturally encoded as a sign of religious devotion, purity, and submission to divine authority. By appropriating this sign for the representation of demonic evil, the film performs a semiotic reversal that simultaneously generates horror and reinforces religious ideology. The horror arises from the violation of cultural expectation—the corruption of a sign normally associated with sanctity.

The ideological reinforcement arises from the implication that demonic power operates through deception and the distortion of sacred appearances. This semiotic strategy reflects Barthes' observation that myth transforms cultural history into nature: the sacred nun's habit is presented as inherently and eternally holy, so its distortion by demonic forces appears as an unambiguous violation of the natural moral order. The communal prayer scene offers a productive counter-example to the film's predominant emphasis on individual vulnerability. As the analysis reveals, the prayer circle connotes collective spiritual resistance—a form of defense rooted in community rather than individual faith.

This connotative dimension introduces a social dimension to the film's ideological system, suggesting that religious community functions as a protective social structure. At the mythological level, this naturalizes the belief that communal faith is more powerful than individual faith, reinforcing the institutional authority of the Catholic Church as depicted in the film. This finding aligns with broader theoretical observations about the function of religious horror as a genre that simultaneously generates fear and reasserts the authority of religious institutions (Cherry, 2009).

The protagonist's developmental arc from fear to direct confrontation enacts a mythological narrative of spiritual empowerment. Irene's progressive movement from a position of vulnerability—subjected to supernatural intrusions, whispers, and psychological destabilization—to a position of direct confrontation with Valak symbolizes the gradual embodiment of divine authority through faith. This arc mirrors the theological structure of trial and redemption that Barthes (1972) identifies as a characteristic operation of myth: the cultural belief that spiritual strength is not given but earned through testing is naturalized as a universal moral truth. The film thus constructs not merely an entertainment narrative but an ideological model for how individuals of faith should respond to spiritual adversity.

The concluding calm scene performs the critical ideological function of consolidating the mythological system that the film has constructed across its narrative arc. After the sustained disruption of spatial, spiritual, and social order—through fire, possession, apparitions, and demonic intrusion—the restoration of calm naturalizes the belief that divine authority ultimately reasserts order.

As Barthes (1972) explains, myth transforms contingent cultural outcomes into natural inevitabilities; the film's conclusion presents the triumph of faith not as one possible outcome of spiritual conflict but as the natural and necessary resolution of any genuine confrontation between divine and demonic forces. This mythological closure is central to the film's ideological function, providing audiences with an affirmation of religious belief that is aesthetically pleasurable, emotionally satisfying, and ideologically consequential.

Compared with previous semiotic studies of horror media, this research makes several distinct contributions. Unlike Awwaliyah's (2024) analysis of Indonesian horror film posters, which focuses on static visual media, this study

examines the dynamic audiovisual text of a Western horror film, incorporating verbal and auditory dimensions that significantly enrich the semiotic analysis.

Unlike Sabrina et al.'s (2023) study of Korean drama, which focuses primarily on connotative meanings within a specific cultural context, this research employs all three levels of Barthes' framework and reveals the mythological operations through which a globally distributed film naturalizes religious ideology. The integration of verbal sign analysis—particularly the treatment of prayers and whispers as semiotic mediators between human and supernatural communication—represents a contribution does not present in previous horror film semiotics research.

5. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that *The Nun II* (2023) functions as a structured and coherent semiotic system in which visual, verbal, and auditory signs collectively construct ideological meanings about religious faith, supernatural evil, and spiritual authority. Through the application of Roland Barthes' tripartite model of signification, the analysis has revealed that the film's communicative architecture operates simultaneously at the levels of denotation, connotation, and myth.

At the denotative level, the film presents observable supernatural phenomena—possessions, apparitions, whispers, sacred objects, and environmental disturbances—that provide the literal foundation for deeper symbolic interpretation. At the connotative level, these phenomena acquire culturally specific meanings shaped by Christian religious codes: possession connotes spiritual vulnerability, the cross connotes divine protection, light connotes salvific presence, and darkness connotes demonic intrusion. At the mythological level, these connotative meanings are naturalized into ideological convictions that present the triumph of faith over evil as inevitable, universal, and self-evident.

Three dominant myths were identified in the analysis: the myth of the eternal battle between good and evil, the myth that supernatural beings communicate through human bodies and dreams, and the myth that sacred objects possess inherent divine power. These myths collectively constitute the film's ideological system, reinforcing a theological worldview in which religious faith is presented as the ultimate defense against supernatural and moral corruption. The inversion of the nun's sacred image into a demonic figure, and the consistent resolution of binary oppositions in favor of light, community, and faith, are the most structurally significant semiotic operations through which these myths are naturalized.

This research confirms the continued relevance and analytical power of Barthes' semiotic theory for the study of contemporary popular media. The theory's capacity to reveal the ideological operations beneath the surface of

entertainment texts makes it an indispensable tool for cultural criticism. Future research may extend this analysis by integrating Barthes' framework with Peirce's triadic sign model or Hall's encoding/decoding theory to produce more comprehensive interpretive accounts of religious horror cinema. Cross-cultural comparative studies examining how different cultural contexts interpret the mythological systems of Western horror films would also contribute significantly to the field.

Ultimately, this research affirms that horror films such as *The Nun II* are not merely vehicles of entertainment but complex cultural texts that shape, reinforce, and disseminate religious ideology through the systematic manipulation of cinematic signs.

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