
PUNK ROCK AS A SYMBOL OF RESISTANCE: A SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF *THE CLASH'S* ALBUM '*COMBAT ROCK*'

Shallom Robert Vito Kumayas¹, Ni Ketut Widhiarcani Matradewi²

^{1,2}Universitas Udayana

Email: robertvito26@gmail.com¹, ketut.widhiarcani@unud.ac.id²

Abstrak Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi bagaimana perlawanan direpresentasikan melalui lirik Combat Rock (1982), album punk rock yang sarat muatan politik dari band Inggris The Clash, dengan menerapkan teori semiotika Roland Barthes (1964), khususnya konsep denotasi, konotasi, dan mitos. Penelitian ini berfokus pada satu permasalahan utama, yaitu bagaimana perlawanan diekspresikan melalui tanda dan simbol dalam lirik. Metode yang digunakan adalah deskriptif kualitatif untuk menginterpretasikan makna-makna mendalam yang terkandung dalam lagu-lagu tersebut. Analisis dilakukan melalui tiga tingkat penandaan Barthes untuk mengungkap bagaimana makna dibangun serta bagaimana ideologi dominan dipertanyakan atau digugat. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Combat Rock menyampaikan perlawanan melalui simbol-simbol berlapis, metafora yang tajam, dan referensi budaya yang membahas isu-isu seperti sensor, militerisme, kolonialisme, ketidaksetaraan, dan kontrol sistemik. Dengan membongkar kontradiksi antara narasi resmi dan realitas yang dialami, The Clash mendekonstruksi mitos-mitos kuat yang melegitimasi kekuasaan, menantang asumsi kesetaraan di bawah hukum, serta menolak anggapan bahwa sistem sosial yang ada bersifat adil atau netral. Melalui proses ini, album ini menunjukkan bagaimana musik punk dapat berfungsi tidak hanya sebagai ekspresi artistik pemberontakan, tetapi juga sebagai bentuk oposisi ideologis yang disengaja, menginspirasi pendengar untuk mengenali dan melawan berbagai bentuk penindasan.

Kata Kunci: Audio Visual Media, Educational Posters, Speaking Ability.

Abstract: This study explores how resistance is represented through the lyrics of *Combat Rock* (1982), a politically charged punk rock album by the British band The Clash, by applying Roland Barthes' semiotic theory (1964), particularly his concepts of denotation, connotation, and myth. Guided by one problems, how resistance is expressed through signs and symbols in the lyrics, the research employs qualitative descriptive methods to interpret the deeper meanings embedded within the songs. The analysis examines the lyrics through Barthes' three levels of signification to reveal how meaning is constructed and how dominant ideologies are questioned or subverted. The findings show that *Combat Rock* conveys resistance through layered symbols, striking metaphors, and culturally loaded references that address issues such as censorship, militarism, colonialism, inequality, and systemic control. By exposing the contradictions between official narratives and lived realities, The Clash dismantle powerful myths that legitimize authority, challenge the assumption of equality under the law, and reject the idea that existing social systems are fair or neutral. Through this process, the album demonstrates how punk music can function not only as an artistic expression of rebellion but also as a deliberate form of ideological opposition, inspiring listeners to recognize and resist various forms of oppression.

Keywords: Punk Rock, Symbol, Semiotics, Resistance.

INTRODUCTION

Music has long been an inseparable part of human life, serving as a medium to express thoughts, feelings, and resistance. Punk rock, which emerged in the 1970s, became a powerful form of protest against social and political conditions of the time. Among its pioneers, The Clash stood out for using music as a tool for sharp social and political critique. With its critical lyrics and rebellious stance, punk rock has continued to evolve while keeping its spirit alive, influencing activism and protest culture across generations. In the modern era, digital platforms have amplified its reach, enabling it to address issues such as social injustice, human rights, and climate change on a global scale. This study focuses on *Combat Rock* (1982), an album that reflects The Clash's strong voice of resistance. Originating from working-class London, the band turned their lived experiences into provocative lyrics addressing social inequality, unemployment, and political unrest in 1970s Britain.

This research is significant due to the limited academic studies discussing punk rock, particularly *The Clash*, as a medium of resistance through Barthes' semiotic framework. Using the concepts of denotation, connotation, and myth (1964), as well as narrative codes (1970), this study aims to uncover how meanings of resistance are constructed through signs and symbols in the album's lyrics. Unlike other punk bands with straightforward language, The Clash combined their criticism with layered metaphors, cultural references, and complex narratives, making *Combat Rock* ideal for semiotic analysis. The album's themes, social inequality, political corruption, racial tension, and economic injustice, remain relevant today. Employing a qualitative approach, this research examines selected tracks to interpret how punk rock lyrics function as ideological resistance, offering insights into how music operates as both cultural expression and political critique.

RESEARCH METHOD

The documentation method was used to collect data for this study, focusing on six selected songs from The Clash's *Combat Rock* that contain strong political and social themes. The process involved carefully reading the official lyrics, sourced from credible platforms such as Genius.com and Spotify, to ensure accuracy. Data collection followed three main steps: selecting songs relevant to political and social issues in the album, using note-taking techniques to extract lyric lines that illustrate themes of resistance and conflict, and reviewing the gathered material to filter out irrelevant content. This systematic approach ensured that only statements directly connected to ideological resistance were retained for further analysis.

For the analysis, the study employed a qualitative method combined with a descriptive technique. The qualitative approach was chosen because it is suitable for interpreting meanings, themes, and contexts in non-numerical data, such as song lyrics. The descriptive technique allowed for a detailed and systematic examination of the lyrical content, identifying patterns and interpreting their social and cultural implications. The lyrics were broken down into lines, verses, recurring phrases, and thematic groupings to highlight linguistic and rhetorical features contributing to the album's overarching messages. This process was supported by references to relevant theories, cultural contexts, and historical backgrounds, enabling a comprehensive understanding of how *Combat Rock* functions as a voice of resistance within the punk rock movement.

The analysis was presented using an informal yet descriptive style to create a conversational and engaging tone. This approach follows Creswell's (2014) guidance that qualitative research should be accessible and relatable, encouraging meaningful audience engagement. By adopting clear and straightforward language, the presentation made the findings easier to understand while fostering an open space for discussion. This method bridged the gap between academic analysis and audience interpretation, allowing readers to not only grasp the significance of the themes but also reflect on their relevance in broader social and political contexts.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

In this section, we explore how *Combat Rock* functions as a artistic expression of resistance by examining six key tracks through the lens of Roland Barthes' semiotic framework. The Clash, known for their politically charged lyrics and anti-establishment stance, use language not just as a form of expression but as a strategic tool for protest. By unpacking each song at the levels of denotation, connotation, and myth, this analysis reveals how the band constructs layered messages that critique systems of power, war, surveillance, inequality, and cultural repression. Through symbolic choices in lyrics, tone, and references, The Clash mobilize signs and codes to expose the violence of authority, challenge dominant ideologies, and offer alternative visions of truth and justice. Barthes' theory provides the analytical tools necessary to decode these elements, allowing us to trace how seemingly simple lines carry deeper ideological weight. In doing so, the study highlights how music, particularly punk rock, can operate as a voice of resistance, not only sounding rebellion but signifying it at multiple semiotic levels.

1. Know Your Rights

Data 1

You have the right not to be killed.

Murder is a CRIME!

Unless it was done by a policeman or an aristocrat.

1. **Denotation:** This line appears to announce a basic legal principle: every person has the right not to be killed, because murder is illegal. In Barthes' terms, this level of meaning corresponds to the **denotative** function of the sign, where the statement mimics a standard civic announcement about legal protections. The phrase "*Murder is a CRIME!*" emphasizes the seriousness of the act, possibly mimicking official legal language. However, this statement is followed by an exception: if the act of killing is committed by a policeman or an aristocrat, the rule does not apply. At this level, this contradiction is presented plainly, and the language mimics a public service announcement, creating an ironic effect.
2. **Connotation:** At the connotative level, this line criticizes the unequal application of justice. According to Barthes, connotation arises from the social and cultural meanings that are attached to words. The words "*policeman*" and "*aristocrat*" symbolize two forms of institutional power: one from the state, and the other from inherited privilege or wealth. These figures represent groups who are often protected by the legal system, even when they commit violence. *The Clash* highlight how the law is not applied equally, especially when those in power commit crimes. This reflects real-world tensions in Britain during the early 1980s, when issues like police violence, class inequality, and racial injustice were widely debated. Events such as the 1981 Brixton riots had exposed how deeply many communities distrusted law enforcement. Through this line, the band gives voice to that distrust, showing that official rights mean little if they do not apply to everyone equally.
3. **Myth:** The myth exposed here is the **myth of equality under the law**, the widely accepted belief that legal systems protect all citizens fairly. According to Barthes, myths are not just stories but cultural narratives that make ideology seem natural. This lyric reveals that the justice system is not neutral but instead protects those in power. By stating that murder is only a crime when committed by ordinary people—not by police or aristocrats—the lyric shows how power shapes who gets punished and who doesn't. The symbolic resistance here lies in the act of exposing that

contradiction. The Clash reject the myth that the law serves everyone, and instead reveal how it often shields those who already have control. Through this exposure, the band encourages listeners to question the supposed fairness of the legal system and to recognize injustice even when it is presented as “lawful.”

2. Rock the Casbah

Data 2

The king told the boogie man

You have to let that raga drop

1. **Denotation:** Literally, the line presents a fictional scene in which a king commands the “boogie men” to stop playing a *raga*, a traditional form of Indian music. According to Barthes, the first level of signification is denotation, where the sign conveys its most basic, literal meaning. In this line, the literal message is that a king is giving an order to a group of “boogie men,” instructing them to stop playing a “raga.” The raga is being banned by the ruling authority figure. The lyric is structured like a command, with a clear speaker (the king) and recipient (the musicians).
2. **Connotation:** At the connotative level, as Barthes describes, signs are filled with cultural associations. In this case, “*the king*” is not just a royal figure; he symbolizes authoritarian or theocratic regimes, a leaders who exercise total control over cultural life. The “boogie men” represent musicians, artists, and youth subcultures that embrace rhythm, dancing, and cultural freedom. The reference to a “raga,” a non-Western, spiritual, and improvisational form of music, stands in contrast to the imposed censorship.

This line reflects **real political conditions**, particularly in the early 1980s, when Western music and youth expression were being censored in some Middle Eastern countries after the Iranian Revolution. Religious and political leaders often saw Western or hybrid musical forms as threats to moral and national identity. The line thus critiques the repression of artistic freedom in the name of tradition or purity.

3. **Myth:** The myth being challenged here is the myth of cultural purity and moral authority, the belief that ruling elites have the right to determine what cultural expressions are acceptable. Barthes explains that myths function by making ideological values appear natural or sacred. In this case, censorship is framed as a defense of morality or national identity. The king’s command appears logical within that myth, but The Clash expose its absurdity.

By portraying the attempt to ban music as ridiculous, the band **de-naturalizes** the myth. They show that the ban is not based on truth or morality, but on fear of youth empowerment and cultural hybridity. The symbol of resistance lies in the act of **playing forbidden music**, and in mocking those who try to control expression. The lyric transforms music into a weapon of defiance a form of resistance against imposed silence.

3. Straight to Hell Data 8

Let me tell you 'bout your blood, bamboo kid

It ain't Coca-Cola, it's rice.

1. **Denotation:** According to Barthes, denotation refers to the basic, literal meaning of a sign. this line refers to a child of mixed heritage (“*bamboo kid*”) a term that suggests Asian ancestry, likely referencing Amerasian children born to American soldiers and Vietnamese women during the Vietnam War. The speaker says, “It ain’t Coca-Cola, it’s rice,” implying that the child’s identity is not American, but Asian. On the surface, this line highlights a contrast in cultural background.
2. **Connotation:** Connotatively, the line reflects issues of **cultural rejection and racial exclusion**. As Barthes explains, connotation arises when words evoke deeper meanings based on social and historical experience. “*Coca-Cola*” connotes American identity, consumerism, and cultural dominance, while “*rice*” connotes Asian identity, simplicity, and marginalization. The line criticizes how children of war, especially those with American fathers were denied belonging, citizenship, and care from the very country that caused the conflict. This reflects a broader connotative meaning: **America’s refusal to accept responsibility for the human consequences of war**, especially when those consequences don’t fit the patriotic myth.
3. **Myth:** The myth being deconstructed is the **myth of Western benevolence and inclusion**, the belief that democratic, Western nations welcome all and protect the innocent. Barthes argues that myths disguise the constructed nature of power relations and present injustice as if it were natural. This lyric directly challenges that ideology: it shows that the U.S., while spreading its culture globally, **refused to recognize or support the children it left behind**. The metaphor of “” unmask the racialized idea of identity and who is considered *Coca-Cola* vs. *rice* “deserving” of American belonging. The resistance lies in the exposure: the song reveals that what

is sold as freedom and democracy is often rooted in exclusion and abandonment.

4. Inoculated City

Data 11

No one mentions the neighbouring war

No one knows what they're fighting for

1. **Denotation:** This line describes a public who live near a war zone but do not discuss the conflict or understand its purpose. Barthes' framework begins with establishing the **first level of meaning**, and in this case, the literal message is that **a society has grown distant from the realities of warfare**. It illustrates a striking image of **detachment, silence, and confusion** not in a faraway place, but in close proximity to violence. The denotative meaning is simple: the public is unaware and uninterested in a war taking place nearby.
2. **Connotation:** The connotative meaning draws attention to a society that has been **conditioned into silence**. The line does not simply report an observation; it suggests something is **fundamentally wrong with how society processes violence and war**. The silence has cultural roots apathy, fear, misinformation which are central to how ideologies are maintained. In modern urban settings, this silence may result from media censorship, desensitization, or psychological avoidance. The phrase "*no one knows what they're fighting for*" suggests that even those involved in the war are disconnected from its objectives, a statement that criticizes the **purposelessness of modern conflict**, where wars are often fought over political or economic interests hidden from the public. Barthes explains that **connotation functions through cultural codes**, and in this lyric, the code is silence as complicity. The citizens' failure to speak out becomes symbolic of a broader culture of compliance.
3. **Myth:** This lyric critiques the **myth of the informed and morally engaged citizen**, a cornerstone of democratic societies. Barthes' notion of myth includes the idea that **ideology hides behind common sense**. In democratic culture, people are expected to be aware of and morally responsive to the world around them. This song reveals the contradiction: although the society is "free," the people are uninformed, desensitized, or indifferent to nearby suffering. The **myth of democratic awareness** is therefore exposed as false.

5. Ghetto Defendant

Data 15

Kick junk. What else can a poor worker do.

1. **Denotation:** On a literal level, this line refers to someone taking drugs “*kick junk*” is slang for using or quitting heroin. The speaker rhetorically asks what other options a poor worker has, implying that drug use is a last resort. Denotatively, the line expresses resignation and lack of choice.
2. **Connotation:** this lyric addresses the desperation and structural hopelessness faced by the working class. As Barthes explains, connotation reveals ideological meanings shaped by experience. Here, “*junk*” refers not just to heroin, but to self-destruction as a response to economic despair. The rhetorical question implies that in a system that offers no dignity, opportunity, or hope, even destructive behavior becomes understandable.

This line critiques the **capitalist logic that blames individuals for their suffering**. The “*poor worker*” is a figure symbolic of those exploited by labor systems, abandoned by public institutions, and forgotten by prosperity. The lyric does not glamorize addiction—it shows it as a **tragic response to exclusion**, and dares to ask why anyone should be surprised by it.

3. **Myth:** The myth being deconstructed is the myth of equal opportunity the belief that hard work always leads to success. Barthes argues that myths like this serve to justify inequality by pretending that everyone has the same chances. The lyric destroys that illusion: for many workers, especially those in ghettos or marginalized areas, there are no chances.

The symbol of resistance lies in **exposing this myth**. The Clash do not condemn the poor worker, they condemn the system that makes destruction feel like the only escape. By turning the question back on society “*What else can a poor worker do?*” the song holds power accountable for its neglect. It is a refusal to moralize, and instead a demand to understand.

6. Red Angel Dragnet

Data 16

Not even five enforcement agencies can save their own.

Ever mind the people

1. **Denotation:** At this level, this line states that even **five law enforcement agencies**

are incapable of protecting their own members. The phrase “*never mind the people*” suggests that if police themselves are not safe, ordinary civilians are even more vulnerable. It’s a simple statement of **powerlessness or ineffectiveness** in the face of violence.

2. **Connotation:** this lyric conveys a sense of institutional failure and moral panic. As Barthes explains, connotation includes meanings shaped by social and historical context. Here, the line reflects the fear that even heavily funded and armed security forces are losing control. The image suggests a breakdown of authority and implies that public safety is an illusion. This would have resonated strongly with listeners in the early 1980s, when New York City was seen as dangerous, chaotic, and overrun by crime and corruption.

The phrase “*never mind the people*” sarcastically exposes how **the public is deprioritized**, showing that even those in power care more about themselves than the communities they claim to protect.

3. **Myth:** The myth exposed here is the myth of state protection, the idea that law enforcement always protects citizens and maintains order. According to Barthes, myths work by naturalizing ideology: making it seem obvious or common sense. In this case, the myth is that more policing equals more safety. But the lyric suggests that even a militarized police state cannot deliver security, and worse, it doesn’t even try to protect ordinary people.

The resistance symbol here is the exposure of hypocrisy: if police forces cannot protect themselves, how can they claim to be guardians of the public? The song invites listeners to **rethink their trust in state authority**, and consider whether such systems actually serve them.

CONCLUSION

The semiotic analysis of *Combat Rock* (1982) using Roland Barthes’ concepts of denotation, connotation, and myth reveals that The Clash constructed their songs as layered critiques of political authority, systemic inequality, and cultural repression. At the denotative level, the lyrics present vivid scenarios drawn from real and imagined contexts, often framed in simple or ironic statements. At the connotative level, these scenarios acquire deeper social and political significance, engaging with issues such as police brutality, censorship, war, racism, and economic marginalization. At the myth level, the band exposes and dismantles

dominant cultural narratives, such as equality under the law, cultural purity, state protection, and equal opportunity, showing how these ideologies often mask exploitation and injustice.

Through symbols, metaphors, and cultural references, The Clash transform *Combat Rock* into more than just a punk rock album; it becomes a cultural text that uses music as a form of ideological resistance. Each song functions not only as an act of rebellion in sound, but also as a challenge to the myths that uphold oppressive structures. By decoding these layers, this study demonstrates how punk music can bridge artistic expression and political activism, offering alternative visions of truth, justice, and social change.

Ultimately, *Combat Rock* stands as a testament to punk rock's enduring ability to inspire critical awareness and collective resistance. The Clash's integration of sharp lyricism with semiotic depth ensures that their critique remains relevant, encouraging listeners, past and present, to question authority, reject complacency, and envision a more equitable society.

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