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The Semiotics of Dramatic Imagery and Representations of Marginalized Childhood in Algerian Television Films: A Reading of the Film "Broken Wings"

سيميولوجية الصورة الدرامية وتمثيلات الطفولة المهمشة في الأفلام التلفزيونية الجزائرية: "قراءة في فيلم الأجنحة المنكسرة"

Karima Sebili[1]
[1]Mouloud Mammeri University of Tizi-Ouzou (Algeria), karima.sebili@ummto.dz
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Abstract:

This article analyzes the semiotic structure of the Algerian social-drama television film Broken Wings, treating it as an applied case through which to examine representations of childhood. It interrogates meaning-making across visual, aural, and technical components of the dramatic text, drawing on Roland Barthes's denotation/connotation framework and on technical découpage to track shots, camera movements, and angles and to interpret their semiotic functions.

The analysis shows that the film's opposing spatial formations construct an image that exceeds straightforward narration, operating instead as a symbolic device for articulating suffering, vulnerability, and the desire for care. Broken Wings offers a critical reading of marginalized childhood as the product of an intersecting system of social precarity and forced labor, homelessness and poverty, injustice, bullying and physical abuse, and the absence of protection and emotional containment in Algerian television drama.
Keywords: television drama; Algerian television film; Broken Wings.

ملخص:

يهدف هذا المقال لتحليل البنية السيميولوجية للفيلم التلفزيوني الدرامي الجزائري "الأجنحة المنكسرة" بوصفه نموذجا تطبيقيا يعالج قضية اجتماعية ويركز على شريحة مهمة في المجتمع الجزائري المتمثلة في الطفولة، وذلك عبر استنطاق الأبعاد الدلالية للفيلم من مكونات بصرية وصوتية وتقنية، داخل هذا المحتوى الدرامي، ليبحث في ثنايا الخطاب الفيلمي وهذا استنادا على مقاربة التحليل السيميولوجي ل"رولان بارث" التعينية والتضمينية كألية لتوليد المعنى، والتقطيع التقني كألية إجرائية لرصد اللقطات وحركات الكاميرا وزوايا التصوير ومحاولة تحليل دلالاتها السيميولوجية ضمن موضوع الدراسة.

ليكشف لنا هذا التحليل ثنائية وتضاد الفضاءات في الفيلم ساهمت في نقل صورة تتجاوز مجرد سرد لأحداث ظاهرة الأطفال لتكون ألية رمزية تعكس المعاناة والهشاشة والرغبة في الاحتواء، ليكون العمل عبارة عن رؤية نقدية مشحونة بدلالات سيميولوجية تستقرئ ظاهرة الطفولة التي وقعت ضحية منظومة مركبة تتداخل فيها عدة عناصر (الهشاشة الاجتماعية والعمل القسري، التشرد والفقر، الظلم والتنمر والاعتداء الجسدي، وانعدام الاحتواء) ليكون العمل رؤية نقدية للطفولة في الدراما التلفزيونية الجزائرية.
كلمات مفتاحية: الدراما التلفزيونية، الفيلم التلفزيوني الجزائري، الأجنحة المنكسرة.

***Corresponding author**: Karima Sebili*

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1. Introduction

The image in audiovisual works constitutes a key expressive medium through which reality is reconfigured by being invested with a set of significations and meanings constructed within the visual narrative context. As such, audiovisual forms have become among the most important vehicles for raising a wide range of social issues and community concerns. Within Algerian audiovisual production in particular, childhood and children's problems have emerged as prominent themes, with the child appearing as an active agent across diverse roles that contribute to reshaping the character and social being of the Algerian child. In this context, the television film Broken Wings stands out as one of the most significant Algerian audiovisual works to depict the child within a socially complex and multi-layered setting, presenting the child in roles whose meanings oscillate between symbolic and realist dimensions.

This study seeks to unveil how the Algerian child is represented within this dramatic space and to identify the key moments that function as turning points in the film's narrative structure. To this end, we draw on Roland Barthes's semiotic approach denotative and connotative analysis one of the central semiological frameworks for uncovering implicit and latent meanings in the film's audiovisual discourse. We also employ technical découpage (a shot-by-shot breakdown) as a supportive analytical tool, insofar as it divides the film into units that facilitate analysis and meaning extraction, thereby enabling a deeper engagement with hidden significations. Accordingly, the study raises the following main question: How did the semiotic structure of Broken Wings contribute to reconstructing the image of the marginalized Algerian child?

From this main question, the following research questions are derived:

1. What forms do the spaces of marginalization take in the television film Broken Wings at both the denotative and connotative levels?
2. What symbolic meanings do these spaces of marginalization invoke at the connotative level?
3. What role do technical variables (shots, camera angle, camera movement) play in embodying the image of the Algerian child and his suffering?
4. What implicit meanings are conveyed by objects (the piggy bank, smoke, the shoe) across the analyzed sequence(s) of the study sample?
5. What semiotic dimension is carried by the final scene of the analyzed sequence, as a sign of transformation in the life of the child protagonist?

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 A Brief Historical Reading of the Image of the Child in Algerian Films

Algerian cinema has produced a range of child-centered works, including fiction films, television films, and documentaries, in both medium- and short-length formats. This focus reflects the perceived necessity for filmmakers to address the child as a socially significant figure. It can be argued that one of the most recurrent themes in Algerian cinema concerns the child's relationship to the War of Liberation particularly the suffering, deprivation, and psychological trauma resulting from the loss of family members. **(Othmani, 2013-2014, p. 52)** Notable examples include *Une si jeune paix* by Djamel Chanderli; *Yasmin* (1960) by

Lakhdar Hamina **(Shantouf, 2012, p. 20)**; *Asafir al-Jaza'ir* (*Birds of Algeria*) by Tayeb Meghni (1970); the television film *Al-Hariq* (*The Fire*) by Moussa Haddad; and *Kartoush golwaz* by Mehdi Charef (2007) **(Bajawi, 2014, pp. 246-247)**

In the 1980s, works such as *We Climb the Mountain* (by a group of directors) and *The Last Image* by Mohamed Lakhdar Hamina (1986) appeared. This period was later marked by stagnation due to the "Black Decade"; nevertheless, productions emerged that addressed the psychological condition of children under terrorism. For instance, *Children of Neon* by Brahim Tessaqi (1990) presents models of the post-independence generation leaving the country. The documentary *Le Rêve de Sisyphe - Algérie, la réconciliation ?* by Fawzia Fekri (2000) approaches the Algerian crisis and reconciliation through the eyes of a child the son of a terrorist. The director Rachid Djaouadi then released *Broken Wings* (2007), depicting the deprivation and suffering experienced by Algerian children living on the streets **(Bajawi, 2014, p. 61)**

2.2 Street Children

The problem of street children is a global phenomenon affecting numerous countries, particularly developing ones. Various factors drive children to the streets, including family disintegration, parental maltreatment, and low living standards. Once on the streets, children suffer from multiple problems: begging, theft, physical and verbal abuse, and detachment from societal values and norms **(Latif & Amin , 2008, p. 6)**. Indeed, the problem of street children in its contemporary dimensions is closely linked to the broader phenomenon of homelessness, representing highly serious indicators whereby the child becomes easy prey to various forms of assault and pressure **(Lachater, 2008-2009, p. 7)**

3. Analysis of the Film Broken Wings

3.1. Technical Credits of the Film

Broken Wings is an Algerian television film in the genre of social drama, directed by the young filmmaker Rachid Djaouadi. It has a runtime of 1 hour and 39 minutes. The cast includes the 13-year-old child actor Adel Harrath, alongside the renowned Sid Ali Kouiret, Aïda Kechoud, Rachid Farès, Moh KG2, and several emerging actors. The film was produced in 2007 within the framework of the "Algiers, Arab Capital of Culture" program, and it is classified as a social dramatic television film.

3.2. Technical Profile of the Director of Broken Wings

Rachid Djaouadi is an Algerian novelist and filmmaker, born in 1966 in the outskirts of Khemis Miliana (Aïn Defla Province), where he received his primary education (1971–1973). He later moved to France and settled in Strasbourg. He has published several novels, including Il aura pitié de nous (He Will Have Pity on Us) (2004). A graduate of the Free Conservatory of French Cinema, he directed his first short film, Bilal, in 2000. He also collaborated with various press organizations. Broken Wings is his first feature-length film.

3. 3 Technical Découpage of the Selected Sequences:

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Sound Track			Image Track					
Sound Effects	**Dialogue/Sound**	**Music**	**Visual Content**	**Camera Movement**	**Camera Angle**	**Shot Scale**	**Duration**	**Shot No.**
Selected Sequence: Vagrancy, Poverty, and Repulsion in a Landfill								
/	/	Sad music.	The image presents an exterior space that appears to be a landfill filled with waste and discarded items. The director focuses on three children seated within the frame, quarrelling over the pages of an old magazine, wearing tattered clothes and rubber shoes; the film then shows them collecting materials for recycling..	A combined movement: a tilt from high to low, followed by a horizontal pan from right to left.	Low + Eye-level	Long Shot	39 sec	**01**
/	/	Sad music.	The shot depicts part of the landfill, revealing garbage trucks used for waste transport; children are positioned at the rear, rummaging through scrap remnants and discarded materials.	Static	A standard shot.	A detail shot.	29 sec	**02**
Truck noise and ambient din.	/	/	The shot shows a child named "Mehdi" carrying iron bars, heading off to sell them	Static	Shot/reverse shot.	American shot.	9 sec	**03**

/	Mehdi: Good evening, Uncle Cherif. Dealer: Good evening, my boy Mehdi. What have you brought to sell me today? Mehdi: Lead (*plomb*). Dealer: Good. Five kilograms for 200 DZA*	/	The shot shows Mehdi arriving at the dealer's stall and handing over the metal so that it can be weighed and priced.	Static	Standard shot.	Medium Close-Up Waist Shot	27 sec	**04**
The sound of clinking coins.	/	/	The shot depicts Mehdi in a cramped interior space an improvised tin-room shack containing an old bed, walls covered with pictures, and an old box in which he keeps the money he earned that day.	Static	Standard shot.	A detail shot.	41 sec	**05**
The sequences of Amou's severe illness and the decisive turning point.								
/	Mehdi: Take it easy, Uncle. Amou: Don't worry this rotten old man isn't going to die.*	/	The image depicts an exterior setting (the landfill), showing Mehdi accompanied by an elderly man with whom he lives, along with their dog. Signs of fatigue are evident: the man breathes with difficulty and leans on the child for support.	Static	Standard shot.	A waist-level medium shot.	26 sec	**01**

/	Mehdi: Uncle, drink (gesturing for him to drink the olive oil). It will cure your cough, God willing.*	Sad, intense music.	The camera shifts to the room, where Mehdi helps his uncle unsteady on his feet reach the bed, then hands him a bottle of olive oil to soothe his cough.	Static	Standard shot.	A medium shot.	24 sec	**02**
/	The German: How are you, Mehdi? Mehdi: Fine, thank God. The German: And how is your uncle? Mehdi: He's ill and doesn't want to see anyone. The German: I won't visit him I just wanted to check on him. And what is that money you're counting ? Mehdi: It's for the	/	The director frames Mehdi outside the room, counting the money from his piggy bank, when his uncle's friend approaches to ask about his condition.	Static	Standard shot.	A medium shot.	1 min	**03**

	medicine, and for something else as well if it's enough, God willing.*							
Car horns and street noise.	/	Sad music.	The scene depicts a clean urban setting, represented by the Martyrs' Memorial, where Mehdi appears carrying a box used to sell cigarettes	Static	Standard shot.	A close-up.	11 sec	**04**
Work and the collision with a bitter reality.								
The sound of coins clinking as they are counted.	Mehdi's voice: "I want cigarettes."*	/	In an extreme close-up, the director frames hands counting money of different denominations coins on one side and banknotes on the other.	Static	A high-angle shot.	An extreme close-up.	6 sec	**01**
/	Dealer (to Mehdi): Did you break open your piggy bank?*	/	In a head-and-shoulders shot, the tobacco shopkeeper is shown selling cigarettes to Mehdi.	Shot/reverse shot.	Standard shot.	A head-and-shoulders shot.	32 sec	**02**
City noise.	Fifty: Hey, kid I'm Farid "Fifty." Starting today, we split the profits	/	The image shows the protagonist, "Mahdi," in the street selling tobacco. He is approached by a character known as "Al-Far," one of the young men who guards an illegal	Static	Standard shot.	A waist-level medium shot.	1 min 40s	**03**

	fifty-fifty. Mehdi: Yeah, sure. Fifty: Listen, I'm not joking. I won't repeat myself. How much money did you make today? Take it out I want to see it.*		parking area, as well as another young man called "Fifty," who appears to be the leader of a local gang. This latter figure despises small street vendors and takes a share of their earnings. The two individuals then confront the child protagonist, threaten him, and "Fifty" grabs him by the neck in order to force him to hand over his money.					
The sequences of crime and assault.								
Mahdi's screams of pain and the sound of blows striking his body.	Al-Far: "Look, it's that guy." (referring to Mahdi) Fifty: "I will take your revenge on him and beat him severely. " Al-Far: "Unfortunately, there aren't many people around to witness this".*	Intense music.	"Fifty" and the gang member run toward Mahdi, brutally assault him, drag him along the ground, and steal the money he earned from selling tobacco.	Static	Standard shot.	A waist-level medium shot.	16 sec	**01**
Mahdi's screams of pain	Fifty: "Come here, I	Intense music.	The scene depicts the gang continuing to brutally beat the	Static	Standard shot.	A waist-level medium	41 sec	**02**

and the sound of punches being delivered to him.	will beat you severely ".*		child, Mahdi.			shot.		
The sound of a head striking a rock.	Fifty: "Are you still alive? Don't be afraid, I won't hit you". Mahdi: "Leave me alone".*	Sad, ominous music.	The shot, set at night, shows Mehdi sitting beneath a tree when he is startled by "Fifty," who moves toward him in a dazed, barely conscious state; terrified, Mehdi pushes him away, whereupon he falls onto a rock and dies.	A horizontal pan from right to left.	Standard shot.	A long shot.	45 sec	**03**
The sound of a car crash.	/	/	The image shows Mehdi fleeing, when a car's headlights suddenly appear, indicating that he has been hit.	Static	Standard shot.	A close-up shoulder-level.	4 s	**04**
/	The man (the driver who hit Mahdi): "How will I explain this to his parents? Oh, what a misfortune… Forty years of driving experience, and yet I end up	/	The scene shows the child Mehdi waking up on a hospital bed, facing the man who hit him and a doctor.	Static	A high-angle shot.	A close-up shoulder-level.	20 sec	**05**

	hitting a child with my car".*							
The dream sequence and the feeling of familial warmth.								
	El Hajj: Slow down, my son (gesturing that he is eating too fast). Give him a little water. El Hajj's wife: Slow down, my son.*	/	The director takes us to El Hajj's home, a fully formed domestic space, where Mehdi is shown at the dining table, eating voraciously and drinking quickly.	Static	Standard shot.	A close-up (shoulder-level).	31 sec	**01**
/	//	/	The shot depicts the child, Mahdi, bathing in the bathtub, with visible expressions of happiness on his face.	Static	Standard shot.	A close-up shoulder-level	17 sec	**02**
Television audio.	El Hajj: Real sneakers top quality. Mehdi: Thank you very much for everything.*	/	In the living room, Mehdi is shown trying on a pair of athletic shoes to make sure they fit.	Static	Standard shot.	Medium shot.	9 sec	**03**
The sequence of Mehdi's imprisonment and suffering.								
/	Cellmate: Do you want a cigarette ? Mehdi: Shut up and	/	The shot depicts Mehdi in prison after Fifty's death, lying on a bunk bed alongside a cellmate.	Static	Standard shot.	A detail shot.	22 sec	**01**

	leave me alone, please.*							
/	Mehdi: "Life… life," gesturing toward the cigarette. *	/	Mehdi is shown in the cell on his bed smoking, with clear signs that he is unaccustomed to it, as indicated by his coughing.	Static	Standard shot.	A waist-level medium shot.	23 sec	**02**
/	/	/	The child, Mahdi, is shown inside a solitary confinement cell in prison, lying on the floor. He appears bald and seems to be under punishment.	Static	Standard shot.	A detail shot.	6 sec	**03**
The end of the sentence and the realization of the dream.								
/	El Hajj: My son come back, Mehdi.*	/	Mehdi leaves the juvenile detention center and encounters El Hajj; he then runs away, while El Hajj watches in astonishment.	Static	Standard shot.	A medium shot.	15 sec	**01**
/	The German: He knew that I wanted to get you out of this poor life. Mehdi: He thought I would forget	Sad music.	The director returns us to the landfill setting, where Mehdi is shown at his uncle's grave, clearing it of weeds and dirt.	Static	Standard shot.	A medium shot.	54 sec	**02**

	him.*							
/	El Hajj: My son, shall we go back home?*	Sad music.	The shot shows Mehdi meeting El Hajj again, who has followed him to the landfill.	Static	Standard shot.	A medium shot.	33 sec	**03**
/	/	Sad music.	Mehdi is shown embracing El Hajj tightly, and the film ends on this shot.	Static	Standard shot.	A shoulder-level close-up.	23 sec	**04**

(*) With regard to the dialogue presented in the technical découpage table, its meaning has been translated from the region's local vernacular into English.

4. Analysis: Textual Analysis of the Selected Sequences

4.1 Denotative and Connotative Analysis of the Sequence of Vagrancy, Poverty, and Scavenging in the Landfill

In this sequence, the director takes the viewer to an open space represented by the Oued Smar landfill in Algiers, the primary site where household and industrial waste is dumped. The setting is marked by the absence of cleanliness, the accumulation of garbage, and stagnant pools of water. Within this scene, a group of children sit at the center of the frame, wearing visibly worn clothing and tall rubber boots, leafing through torn old magazines filled with images of celebrities and artists. Opposite them, large trucks arrive to unload their waste, prompting the children to move toward them immediately to search for recoverable materials.

The camera concentrates on the rear of the trucks as they discharge their loads, after which the children begin rummaging and probing through the refuse with wooden sticks. In one shot, a child named Mehdi is shown carrying iron bars on his small shoulders and heading directly to sell them, while the other two children are shown quarrelling over the remaining magazine pages. Mehdi reaches the scrap dealer and hands over the metal he has collected (lead, plomb), so that its price can be assessed. The director then shifts from a wide exterior space to a cramped interior setting: a small tin shack (barraque). Its details reveal an old bed covered with a faded blanket, and walls densely covered with random pictures and posters cut from old magazines. In this space, Mehdi moves toward a box placed to one side of the room and takes out a small piggy bank in which he saves the money he earns from collecting and selling scrap.

In another shot from the same sequence, Mehdi appears with an elderly man nicknamed "Amou," sitting outside the room in the back area, accompanied by a dog. The dialogue unfolds in Algerian Arabic; and because Amou is hard of hearing, he struggles to understand Mehdi's words, mishearing the French word cadeau as gâteau. This scene is

accompanied by sad music.



A film still of Mehdi at the landfill.

This sequence, taken as a whole, constructs a semiological configuration that blends the realistic depiction of Mehdi and his friends in the landfill with layered symbolic meanings. The use of long takes and panoramic movements across the vast open space reveals the marginalization and exclusion of children who, in principle, should be integrated into structured social environments rather than confined to a dumpsite, where they leaf through magazines that are neither appropriate to their age nor reflective of their innocent identities. In this sense, the scene comes to signify a form of social subjugation.

Furthermore, the presence of trucks and the children's scavenging activities among waste materials reflect the harshness of a survival economy rooted in coercive labor, where used objects are recycled. This reality symbolizes a divided social structure, composed of a central, productive class and a peripheral group that survives on the remnants of the former. The scene depicting two children fighting over images from discarded magazines signifies immaturity and a lack of awareness of their current conditions and pressing concerns. In contrast, Mehdi's act of carrying iron bars to sell denotes premature maturity and his forced integration into the market economy, assuming responsibility at an early age.

The harsh, expansive external space is juxtaposed with the confined interior of a narrow room lacking the basic conditions for a dignified life. Here, conventional forms of entertainment, such as radio and television, are replaced by posters from old magazines, while the presence of a piggy bank signifies thrift and an emerging awareness of the importance of saving money. The interaction between Mehdi and "Amou" reflects a breakdown in communication, a lack of harmony, and an absence of affection between a guardian figure and a child in need of compassion. This is reinforced by the use of colloquial dialogue, which aligns with popular culture yet simultaneously conveys the erosion of emotional bonds and the suppression of tenderness, if any remains.

Consequently, humane and compassionate relationships appear to be absent within this environment, mirroring its inherent harshness. This segment of the film not only portrays poverty and homelessness but also points to the disintegration of the social structure, inequality, and the marginalization of a vulnerable segment of society children who are deprived of affection and stripped of their humanity on the margins of a forgotten landfill.

4.2. Denotative and Connotative Analysis of the Sequence of "Amou's" Illness and the Decisive Turning Point in Mehdi's Life

This sequence portrays the deterioration of Amou's condition who represents Mehdi's only "family" within the landfill through a series of shots ranging from waist-level medium shots to medium and long shots. The director visualizes the uncle's illness and ensuing health crisis in an exterior space where the two appear on a relatively elevated mound of

earth, accompanied by the dog. Amou's affliction is conveyed through signs of severe sickness and exhaustion: his body tilts as he leans on Mehdi to prevent himself from falling. After a long struggle, Mehdi manages to get him to his bed inside their room; the symptoms intensify through the sound of coughing, rapid breathing, and a weakened, faltering voice. Olive oil retrieved by Mehdi from the box emerges as their only available remedy, which he offers to Amou to drink.

In the same sequence, the director shifts to an exterior space where Mehdi is shown counting the money he has saved. At this moment, one of Amou's acquaintances, known as "the German," arrives to visit the sick uncle; Mehdi informs him of Amou's condition and his inability to receive visitors. What stands out here is Mehdi's disclosure to the German of his intention to buy medicine for his uncle, as well as his determination to pursue a particular plan should he succeed, God willing; the German encourages him to move forward.

Immediately after this exchange, the director moves away from the landfill to a "clean" urban space, recognizable through the Martyrs' Memorial in Algiers. Mehdi is shown standing on a high bridge carrying a box typically used as a makeshift table for selling cigarettes on the street. This scene is marked by the city's soundscape traffic noise dominated by car horns.



A film still depicting Amou's illness.

This sequence, in its semiological dimension, suggests that "Amou's" illness constitutes a pivotal turning point in Mehdi's life. Within this context, roles are reversed: Mehdi transforms from a dependent child into a source of support and care for his uncle, assuming responsibility for him as illness weakens and bends his body. Mehdi thus becomes his uncle's mainstay in an environment that can be described as lacking even the most basic conditions for a dignified life where olive oil is perceived as the only available remedy and the sole traditional means of alleviating illness.

Faced with this harsh reality, Mehdi finds himself compelled to make a decisive choice: to seek an alternative and pursue a glimmer of change that might enable him to rescue his uncle from this environment. Consequently, he takes the money he has saved and moves toward the city in order to purchase medicine and search for new opportunities. This transition is visually articulated through a setting in Algiers, where the urban landscape is juxtaposed with the Maqam Echahid (Martyrs' Memorial), a powerful symbol of resistance and revolution. Within the narrative, it may be interpreted as an emblem of defiance against a harsh present and as an expression of hope for transformative change. Yet, this path is far from easy, as emphasized by the image of the tobacco box Mehdi carries on his back; working in a vast and unfamiliar city poses significant challenges for a child who has

known only the confined space of the landfill.

At the connotative level, the sequence reinforces the idea that Amou's illness marks a profound transformation in Mehdi's life trajectory. The child shifts from being a recipient of care and affection to becoming an active agent, a provider, and a caretaker responsible for his ailing uncle. This transformation unfolds within a setting deprived of even the most basic living conditions, where access to medical care is absent and olive oil serves merely as a rudimentary remedy for the uncle's persistent cough. Confronted with such conditions, Mehdi is driven to make a critical decision one that has the potential to alter the course of his life. This is foreshadowed in the scene where he stands on a bridge facing the Martyrs' Memorial, a landmark that signifies resistance and the liberation struggle, and which can also be read as a metaphor for Mehdi's own resistance against his harsh reality and his aspiration for a better future. This aspiration is further symbolized by the small box he carries on his back, through which he sells tobacco and seeks to carve out a path toward change.

4.3 Denotative and Connotative Analysis of the "Work and Collision with Harsh Reality" Sequence

The director opens this sequence with an extreme close-up of two hands counting money laid out on a table. The coins are arranged in one pile, while banknotes of varying denominations are placed separately. This visual is accompanied by Mehdi's voice, stating: "I want to exchange them for tobacco." The camera then shifts to reveal a small shop densely stocked with various types of tobacco. In a close-up shot, the vendor appears and, upon observing the banknotes, infers that the money represents the child's savings, remarking: ("It seems you have broken your piggy bank").

Subsequently, Mehdi is shown with his first customer after setting up his tobacco table. This vendor emerges as a pivotal character in the film, referred to as "El-Far" ("The Rat"). Through the ensuing interaction, it becomes evident that he does not know Mehdi and seeks to identify this new arrival. In the closing scene of the sequence, Mehdi is framed in a waist-level close-up as he sells tobacco. The frame is abruptly intruded upon by the character "Fifty," who represents the street's dominant authority and territorial controller. The camera captures Fifty aggressively confronting Mehdi, seizing him by the neck with both hands and choking him, thereby coercing him into sharing his profits as a condition for allowing him to operate in that space. This dynamic is further reinforced by Fifty's harsh and intimidating tone.



A frame still depicting Mehdi being beaten by the gang.

At the connotative level, this sequence evokes multiple semiotic significations. The director moves beyond a mere narration of events by orchestrating a transition from one space to another in order to materialize the child's passage into a hostile urban milieu where

authority is imposed. After the child finally succeeds in establishing his own small venture an improvised street stand for selling cigarettes purchased with his savings, which would ordinarily index an innocent, childlike phase of saving those savings are re-signified as an entry point into a harsh material reality. The child then becomes a hostage compelled to share his earnings with a gang member who asserts control and domination over "property" that was never his in the first place, but rather belonged to the public domain.

Under threat, the child is subjected to a structure of brutal determinants: street gangs and an informal economy operating within a soundscape dominated by noise and car horns an uproar that swallows the small child's voice and innocence. In this alienating space, he confronts the character "the Rat," which functions as a symbol of informing and surveillance, while "Fifty" embodies illegitimate power. Mehdi's being seized by the neck thus acquires a profound semiotic charge, marking the climax of bodily bullying and symbolic coercion: his effort and hard-earned money are converted into a "tax" paid to the unlawful law of the jungle. Mehdi is consequently displaced from the landfill harsh yet, in a sense, containing to a merciless space of exploitation.

4.4 Denotative and Connotative Analysis of the "Crimes and Assaults" Sequence

This sequence represents the climax of physical violence inflicted upon the child Mehdi. It begins with a waist-level close-up shot of him standing in front of a bridge, gazing into the distance. Soon after, "El-Far," accompanied by "Fifty," appears and violently assaults the child, striking his small body with great force. The scene is punctuated by intense music and harsh dialogue, in which Mehdi is insulted with expressions such as: "You filthy one, I will beat you severely." The director continues to depict Mehdi as he is beaten, dragged along the ground, and robbed of his money.

The sequence then shifts to an outdoor nighttime setting, where Mehdi is sitting under a tree. He is suddenly confronted by "Fifty," who approaches him in a state of intoxication. Through a panoramic movement, Fifty advances toward the terrified child, who retreats backward in fear. In a moment of extreme panic, Mehdi pushes the gang leader with both legs, causing him to fall onto a stone and lose consciousness. The scene is further intensified by strong and frightening musical cues. Overcome with fear, the child runs away, only to be met by a passing car in a sudden shot, suggesting that he has been hit.

The camera then cuts to a hospital room in a high-angle shot, showing Mehdi lying on a hospital bed, visibly exhausted and injured. Accompanying him is the man who ran him over, referred to as "El-Hadj." This character displays compassion, tenderness, and concern for Mehdi, expressing fear for the child's condition and regret over how he will justify the accident to Mehdi's family after many years of driving experience.

At the connotative level, this sequence is rich in symbolic meanings that indicate the escalation of violence against the child. Mehdi is stripped of both his money and his physical integrity, becoming a victim of a harsh and bitter reality. The violence evolves from symbolic spatial marginalization in the landfill to direct and brutal violence in the city. The insult "filthy" reflects psychological distortion and social humiliation, emphasizing cruelty and dehumanization, as the child is reduced to an oppressed, animal-like state under the domination of human predators.

The transition to the nighttime setting marks a turning point, symbolizing the end of "Fifty" after his fall onto a stone caused by Mehdi's defensive act. This represents the collapse of tyranny and the disintegration of the power that once terrorized the child. However, the pressure on Mehdi intensifies as his escape, driven by fear, leads to a traffic accident. He regains consciousness in the hospital, broken and exhausted.

Within this conflict, the character of "El-Hadj," despite being the one who hit Mehdi, introduces a human and ethical dimension to the narrative. His remorse, concern, and fear for the child reinforce the idea that even within a corrupt system, a compassionate and morally conscious individual can emerge. Through this, the director suggests that behind disorder and suffering, there remains a possibility for responsibility, moral awareness, and hope for righteousness.

4.5. Denotative and Connotative Analysis of the Dream Sequence and the Feeling of Familial Warmth

This sequence marks a shift in the film's narrative trajectory. The camera transports us to the space of a pleasant home that provides the basic requirements of a dignified life. Mehdi is shown with El Hajj's family, consisting of El Hajj and his wife. In a detail shot, they are framed around a dining table set with water, food, and fruit. The scene focuses on Mehdi as he eats voraciously and drinks water hastily, even producing audible sounds, prompting El Hajj to reassure him with the phrase, "Slow down, my son," echoed by his wife: "Slow down, my son."

In another scene, Mehdi appears in the bathroom, sitting in the bathtub as he bathes, with visible joy on his face. This moment is characterized by the absence of both dialogue and music. In a medium shot, the director then shifts within the same sequence to the living room, where the child is shown with El Hajj trying on a pair of athletic shoes El Hajj has bought for him. The scene is accompanied by the sound of the television and a brief exchange, as Mehdi says: "Thank you, El Hajj."



A film still of Mehdi in El Hajj's home.

This sequence carries connotative meanings that point to a shift in the narrative trajectory from a space of injustice and domination to one of care, comfort, safety, and satiety. A set of everyday practices eating, bathing, and receiving new shoes becomes a semiotic register through which the child reclaims life as a human being and reasserts a sense of selfhood. Mehdi's rapid eating and drinking signify deprivation and the residues of poverty and chronic hunger. In turn, the communicative utterances of both El Hajj and his wife function as cultural codes of tenderness, attention, and familial containment forms of affective protection from which Mehdi was excluded in the landfill. The interaction is also structured by an intergenerational logic whereby adults show compassion toward children, care for them, and provide protection.

The bathing scene further intensifies connotations of relief, cleanliness, and purification from the residues of the past; it is reinforced by silence and the absence of music, which lends the events a heightened sense of realism. The athletic shoes signify social integration, lightness, and well-being, in contrast to the rubber boots associated with the landfill. Likewise, the television, as a direct medium of everyday domestic communication, stands in opposition to the old posters tied to the past. Finally, the scene of gratitude reflects an ordinary gesture: a child receiving a gift and thanking adults for it.

4.6. Denotative and Connotative Analysis of the Sequence of Mehdi's Imprisonment and Suffering

This sequence depicts the discovery of the incident involving "Fifty," which results in his death, leading to Mehdi's arrest. Mehdi is then shown in a cell with another boy. He lies on a bunk bed, occupying the upper bunk while the other child takes the lower one. The two exchange a few words, after which the boy offers Mehdi a cigarette, asking, "Do you want a cigarette?" Mehdi replies, "Shut up take your cigarette and leave me alone." Elsewhere in the sequence, Mehdi is shown holding a cigarette and attempting to smoke, but he is overcome by coughing signaling that he is not accustomed to it while repeating the phrase, "Life… life." The camera then shifts to another space that appears to be solitary confinement: a dark room in which Mehdi lies on the floor, curled into himself, his head completely shaved.



A film still of Mehdi in prison.

This sequence connotes a renewed rupture and defeat, as any horizon of rescue collapses; prison functions as the representation of the extreme limit of suffering. It can be read as a break between the prospect of stability and the possibility of living a "normal" life. The dialogue points to the search for an intrusive, alien means cigarettes as a form of forgetting; and although Mehdi's body resists tobacco, it nevertheless becomes an outlet that distracts him from his tragedy.

4.7. Denotative Analysis of the Sequence of the End of the Sentence and the Realization of the Dream

This sequence depicts the end of the child Mehdi's period of confinement and punishment in the juvenile detention center. Mehdi appears in a medium shot at the exit door, only to find El Hajj waiting outside. Mehdi runs away nonetheless, and El Hajj calls after him, "My son, Mehdi come back here," but to no avail.

Mehdi is then shown at Amou's grave in the landfill, removing weeds and plastic bags from it. "The German" joins him and a brief dialogue unfolds: the German says, "He knew that I wanted to get you out of this poor place," to which Mehdi replies, "He thought I would forget him." The child then returns to his daily routine at the Oued Smar landfill. In a medium shot, he is shown buying a quick meal from a mobile food truck. El Hajj appears

again, calls Mehdi by name, and asks him to return home with him. Mehdi agrees silently, without resistance.

The director concludes with a final shot of Mehdi and El Hajj embracing tightly. The shot is accompanied by sad music and El Hajj's words, "Come on, my son let's go back home," after which the film ends.

A film still from the sequence showing Mehdi's release from detention, his return to the landfill, and his subsequent encounter with El Hajj.



A frame still from the sequence depicting Mehdi's release from the reformatory, his return to the landfill, and his encounter with "El-Hadj."

This sequence traces a new connotative trajectory that brings together multiple symbolic registers. Mehdi's release from detention signifies a moment of relief and a first ray of hope, while his encounter with El Hajj figures loyalty and genuine affection on the part of this man. Mehdi's refusal of the offer, however, may be read as a fear of investing in a false hope and an inability to rebuild trust; the experience of incarceration is not easily overcome. He therefore rejects this containment and returns to the landfill directly to Amou's grave, since Amou could not wait for Mehdi during his prolonged absence. Mehdi's act becomes a sign of fidelity, attachment to the past, and refusal to forget the elderly man who, though unable to articulate his love openly, cared for him deeply; the harshness of the place had deprived him of the capacity to express affection an implication reinforced by Mehdi's dialogue with "the German." El Hajj's reappearance in Mehdi's life thus functions as a renewed opportunity to accept care, to attempt the restoration of trust, and to reopen the possibility of belonging. The sad music and the prolonged embrace between El Hajj and Mehdi culminate in a distinctly humane moment a renewed beam of hope and a desire to rebuild the self and mend what has been broken.

5. Conclusion

This conclusion presents a synthesis of the study's key findings. Drawing on a semiological analysis of selected sequences from the television film *Broken Wings*, and relying on Roland Barthes's denotative and connotative approach, the study arrives at the following results:

1. *Broken Wings* contributes to constructing an image of marginalized childhood as a symbolic communicative discourse that reflects social exclusion through a network of signifying elements. The events are not presented as a mere narration of reality; rather, the Oued Smar setting (scavenging, forced labor, poverty, homelessness, and the tin shack) is revealed as a harsh environment that strips children of their childhood, humanity, and fundamental rights, including schooling, medical care, tenderness, and protection.

2. Opposed to the landfill is the urban space of the city, which is charged with multiple symbolic meanings: a space of peak exploitation, violence, rupture, informing and surveillance, domination, and the imposition of a "survival tax" within an illicit economy governed by street gangs.

3. Objects (recyclable materials, the piggy bank, prison, and the shoes) carry meanings that drive the narrative's turning points. The piggy bank signifies saving and the child's forced assumption of responsibility; recycling and selling discarded materials signal the coercive insertion of childhood into an illicit economy and a premature entry into market logics. Cigarettes function as an escape from reality and a marker of the extreme limit of suffering, while the shoes signify a dream, hope, and a desire for care, acceptance, and social integration restoring the contours of childhood.

4. The film's spaces foreground a set of oppositions: evil versus goodness, cruelty versus containment, and the longing for family warmth, protection, repair, and fidelity.

5. The director concludes these sequences with the hope of encounter and acceptance, signaling an end to suffering and harshness, such that human bonds and the desire to rebuild a stable self ultimately prevail.

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