

AUTHORITY AND DISCIPLINE IN POST-WORLD WAR II FRENCH EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS IN THE FILM LES CHORISTES

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ABSTRACT

In the study of French language and culture, French-language films serve as important objects of study because they represent the social values, history, and ideology that have developed within French society. The film *Les Choristes* is set during the post-World War II period in 1949. During that era, France underwent a phase of social and moral reconstruction in which educational institutions held an important role in reshaping the social order through discipline, obedience, and moral values. Education during that period was inseparable from the historical and political circumstances surrounding it. This study aims to analyze the representation of power and discipline in French educational institutions in the post-World War II era through the film *Les Choristes* (2004) by Christophe Barratier. We employ a descriptive qualitative approach using Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis method through three levels: denotation, connotation, and myth, which are subsequently linked to Michel Foucault's theoretical framework of power and discipline. The analysis of six scenes reveals that power is represented through the Action-Reaction principle as a mechanism of instant punishment without any investigative process, while discipline is manifested through the internalization of institutional norms that shape students' bodily responses into automatic obedience. Both practices are interrelated in maintaining institutional dominance over the formation of individuals. This study concludes that the film *Les Choristes* represents power and discipline as an integrated system within educational institutions, consistent with Foucault's concepts of docile bodies and normalization.

Introduction

Film is an audiovisual communication medium that conveys ideas, stories, emotions, or reality through a series of moving images, using technologies such as visuals, sound, dialogue, music, and editing to create meaning and experience for the audience (Yuwita,

2018). Another definition states that film is an audiovisual text constructed through a system of signs. The reality effect created by filmmakers is achieved through the construction of reality through visual, narrative, and technical means (Metz, 1991). Within the communication system, film functions as an essential medium for conveying messages to audiences, both individuals and groups, as a means of information exchange (IS, 2011). Film is more than just entertainment; it is a cultural text that captures the conventions, values, and social conditions of a given era and location. As a result, a wide range of academic fields, including cultural studies, communication, literature, linguistics, and education, often study film.

French-language movies are significant subjects of study in the study of French language and culture because they depict the ideology, history, and social values that have evolved within French society. Film can be understood as a language (*langage cinématographique*) that conveys meaning through a series of visual and auditory signs (Metz, 1974b). As emphasized by Gaudreault & Gunning (1989), in the study of cinema, the writing of film history cannot be separated from its underlying theoretical foundations, as the two constitute an inseparable whole. Christophe Barratier's film *Les Choristes*, which debuted on March 17, 2004, exemplifies this. With a runtime of 1 hour and 37 minutes, the film received recognition at award ceremonies, including nominations for Best Foreign Language Film and Best Original Song at the 77th Academy Awards.

Les Choristes is a French-language film that presents a bleak portrait of a boarding school in 1949. The school is depicted as an institution that implements a strict disciplinary system under the leadership of the headmaster, Rachin. Rachin places troubled children under his care and educates them through a rigid system with the slogan "Action, réaction!" When Cléo Mathieu, a new school administrator, tries to undermine Rachin's authoritarian strategy, which relies on oppressive power processes, the main conflict arises. To show the authority's control over disciplined subjects, Rachin responds to each student infraction (*action*) with physical punishment or seclusion in a dark cell (*réaction*). By introducing music as a medium of expression and a more humanistic substitute for discipline, Cléo Mathieu's entry at the Fond de l'étang school contributes to the transformation of the mechanisms already established by Rachin. The conflict between two opposing approaches, Mathieu's artistic emancipation and Rachin's institutional violence, illustrates the complex dynamics of power relations inside a learning environment at Fond de l'étang.

The film *Les Choristes* is set in 1949, during the post-World War II period. During that era, France underwent a phase of social and moral reconstruction, during which educational institutions played an important role in reshaping the social order through discipline, obedience, and moral values. Education during that period was inseparable from the historical and political circumstances. The film *Les Choristes* not only depicts educational practices of the 1940s but also constructs a narrative that the school is a space for post-war reconstruction (Garnier, 2004). For this reason, an analysis of the film *Les Choristes* is relevant for revealing how power and discipline are represented and validated

within the context of French educational institutions in the post-World War II era. Accordingly, this study focuses on the analysis of power and discipline in French educational institutions as depicted in the film *Les Choristes*. The analysis is conducted through semiotics to identify the meanings of the signs of power and discipline throughout the film. This study aims to describe the results of an analysis of the representation of power and discipline in the French education system in the post-World War II era, through the conflict between the authoritarian approach of the character Rachin and the humanistic approach of the character Mathieu, using semiotic analysis.

Semiotics is the science of interpreting signs, holding that everything in the world, from words, images, and bodily gestures to clothing, is a sign that carries a particular meaning (Sartini, 2007). Barthes (1967) states that semiotics is the science of interpreting signs, in which language is a system of signs that carry messages from society. Littlejohn & Foss (2009) state that the science of semiotics aims to identify the meanings contained in a sign or to interpret those meanings to understand how a communicator constructs a message. In semiotic studies, De Saussure (1916) proposed that a sign consists of a signifier and a signified. This concept was subsequently developed by Metz (1974a), who applied it to film, whereby moving images, sound, language, and music are understood as signifiers that convey meanings to the audience. Barthes (1985a) categorizes the meaning of signs into three layers: denotation, connotation, and myth. At the denotation stage, the film presents events and occurrences literally, such as punishments, rules, and interactions. At the connotative level, film sequences reveal ideologies of authoritarianism, social control, and power. At the myth stage, the myth legitimizes an educational system that normalizes violence and strict discipline as reasonable means to pursue order. The film *Les Choristes* can be analyzed, and its depictions of discipline and authority explained using these three layers of meaning as a framework.

Foucault (1975) explains that discipline is a modern mechanism of power that operates through surveillance, punishment, and the normalization of individual behavior, particularly within various closed institutions such as prisons, hospitals, and schools. Three methods can be used in the educational setting to accomplish this discipline: first, hierarchical observation by methodically keeping an eye on every student; second, the normalization of rules along with a set of incentives and penalties that create behavioral standards deemed “normal”; third, the examination system functions as a medium for surveillance and the standardization of individual abilities. By using these three strategies, educational establishments actively mold students into submissive people in addition to imparting knowledge. The fact that disciplinary power is based on a network of institutions rather than a single authority, which subtly characterizes discipline as a normal and natural state, sets Foucault’s thesis apart from other conceptions of power.

In general, Budiardjo & Miriam (2008) defines power as the ability of an individual or group to influence others in accordance with the will of the power holder. In line with this definition, Martono & Nanang (2014) defines power as the opportunity or means for an indi

vidual to achieve their own desires, even in the face of resistance from others within social relationships. Foucault, on the other hand, offers a different perspective: power is not something that can be possessed but rather a strategy dispersed through discourse in everyday life, including within educational institutions (Siregar, 2021). Power functions in intricately linked ways in the field of education. Foucault emphasizes that disciplinary power in education shifts from a form of authority toward a system of internal surveillance, in which everyone internalizes discipline to the point of becoming their own overseer (Almas, 2024).

A few earlier scholars have looked at how discipline and power are portrayed in movies. Intan (2014) analyzed the film *Les Choristes* using Freud's psychoanalytic theory and found that the characters' behavior in the film represents the dynamics of the id, spontaneous emotional impulses, the ego in adjusting to rules, and the superego located in the moral values and discipline of the institution. The current study, in contrast, looks at the same movie. It draws on Barthes' viewpoint, focusing on how discipline and authority are portrayed in educational settings through a three-layered system of signification: denotation, connotation, and myth.

Astutik (2020) analyzed the power relations of Black women in the film *Hidden Figures* through Foucault's perspective and found that power is not only present in formal authority but also in racial discrimination and institutional structures that limit opportunities, while the female characters respond through intellectual negotiation. Still drawing on Foucault's perspective, that study focuses on issues of gender and race in the workplace. In contrast, the present study focuses on the representation of power and discipline in the film *Les Choristes* in the context of post-World War II France, drawing on Barthes' perspective.

Fitra & Prihatmoko (2026) analyzed the representation of political power in the film *Dirty Vote*, finding that power is exercised not only by formal state institutions but also through elite strategies and visual narratives to shape public opinion in the democratic process. In contrast to that study, which focuses on a political context, the present study examines the representation of power and discipline in educational institutions in the film *Les Choristes*.

Ronald (2025) analyzed the representation of teachers as agents of change in the 2023 film *Radical* using a qualitative semiotic method. He found that the teacher character is portrayed as an inspirational figure who drives change through empathetic and motivational interactions with students. In contrast to that study, which focuses on learning motivation, the present study examines, through Foucault's perspective, the representation of power and discipline in educational institutions in the film *Les Choristes*.

At the international level, Apriyanto et al. (2025) analyzed disciplinary power practices in secondary schools using Foucault's panoptic concept. Surveillance of appearance, behavior, and examinations is a form of discipline, depending on the qualitative approach used. The current study differs from prior studies in that it focuses on an actual school, while the latter examines how disciplinary authority is portrayed in the movie *Les Choristes*.

Lin (2023) analyzed the film *Les Choristes* using the conceptual framework of effective teaching, finding that the character of Mathieu embodies qualities of an effective teacher, including honesty, patience, and the ability to manage diverse student personalities within a strict educational system. Unlike previous studies, which focus on teaching quality, this one examines how power and discipline are portrayed in the same movie from Foucault's perspective.

In light of the aforementioned, it is crucial to conduct this study, as the movie *Les Choristes* depicts not only the dynamics of teacher-student interaction but also the authority and discipline practices typical of the post-World War II French educational system. Through a semiotic approach, the film's visual signs, dialogue, and music are analyzed as signifiers that reveal the power and authority embedded within them. This study is expected to serve as a bridge in understanding how power and discipline are systematically represented. Therefore, this study aims to analyze power and discipline in educational institutions in the film *Les Choristes* through Barthes' semiotic concept, considering post-World War II French education and the conflict between Rachin's authoritarian approach and Mathieu's humanistic approach.

Method

This study employs a descriptive, qualitative approach, drawing on Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis. This approach was chosen because the study aims to describe and represent the meanings contained in the film's signs. Barthes' semiotic analysis is applied through three stages: denotation, to interpret the literal meaning of dialogues and narratives; connotation, to interpret implicit meanings related to power relations; and myth, to reveal the ideology and systems constructed through practices of power and discipline in the film.

The data source in this study is the film *Les Choristes*, which was released in 2004 and directed by Christophe Barratier, with a runtime of 1 hour and 37 minutes. The data analyzed consists of dialogues between characters and story narratives related to practices of power and discipline in educational institutions. Data collection was conducted through documentation, repeated viewings of the film, and the recording of relevant narratives and dialogues, in accordance with the research objectives.

In this study, the researcher employed document-based data collection techniques. According to Sugiyono (2013), documents are records of past events whose existence serves as historical evidence that can be presented in various formats, including written forms (biographies, regulations, notes), images (photographs, sketches), and works of art (sculptures, films). Therefore, this technique was used because it is relevant to film research that requires dialogue and narratives as written data.

The data analysis technique was carried out through several stages. First, the researcher performed data reduction by selecting relevant material from the film *Les Choristes*'s overall narratives and dialogues. At this stage, data unrelated to practices of power and discipline in educational institutions were excluded. In contrast, relevant data

were coded and grouped into data cards as part of the qualitative data presentation, based on indicators of power, discipline, and resistance (Miles, 1994). Second, the reduced data were analyzed using Barthes' semiotics through three stages: the denotation stage, which identified literal, direct, and explicit meanings by examining the relationship between the signifier and the signified in dialogues and narratives. The connotation stage involved interpreting the implicit meanings of values, ideology, and power relations underlying the dialogues and narratives. The third stage, myth, involved revealing the naturalization of ideology, encompassing values that are historical and constructed, made to appear as a normalized truth, derived from the connotation stage Barthes (1972, 1985b). Through these three stages, the researcher concluded the verification stage, providing interpretations of the representations of power and discipline depicted in the film *Les Choristes*.

Results and Discussion

Results

The data analyzed in this study consist of scenes from the film *Les Choristes* that depict power and discipline. Several scenes were found, both explicitly and implicitly, reflecting practices of power and discipline in French educational institutions in the Post-World War II era. The following presents the results of the semiotic analysis of the film *Les Choristes*.

Table 1. Semiotic analysis results of the film *Les Choristes*

Data	Power			Discipline		
	D	K	M	D	K	M
C/09	✓					
C/015		✓				
C/06			✓			
C/01				✓		
C/11					✓	
C/08						✓

Based on the summary table above, the six scenes analyzed in the film *Les Choristes* include three that represent the exercise of power and three that represent disciplinary practices. Representations of power are evident through the application of immediate punishment without any investigative process, the removal of pupils' rights, the use of punishment as a means of pressure, and the exercise of power by institutional staff. Meanwhile, disciplinary practices are evident in the normalization of institutional values, the voluntary acceptance of rules, and immediate physical responses, which signify compliance with authority.

Overall, power and discipline in the film *Les Choristes* operate simultaneously and are interrelated. Through Barthes's semiotics, each scene is categorized into three levels:

Denotation, the factual depiction; Connotation, the meaning constructed behind the denotation; and Myth, the ideology naturalized by the institution. The representation of power is dominant in the film, with the principle of *action-réaction* at its core, whilst the dominant practice of discipline is demonstrated through the pupils' direct physical reactions. These findings will be discussed further in the following scenes.

Discussion

The following presents the analysis of six scenes from the film *Les Choristes* that reflect the representation of power and discipline. Each scene encompasses three levels of Barthes' semiotics, namely: Denotation, Connotation, and Myth, after which the findings are linked to Foucault's theoretical framework of power and discipline.



Figure 1. Rachin's Unilateral Action Against Morhange (Data C/09, 27.57)

Morhange a dessiné une caricature de Rachin dans les toilettes et a écrit une insulte. Mathieu lit l'inscription de Morhange à voix haute.

Rachin: Monsieur Mathieu. Action Réaction! Au cachot.

Rachin s'en va et Mathieu emmène Morhange au cachot.

Data C/09 is a scene with a duration of 27.57, 28.20, and 28.23, set in a classroom, involving the characters Rachin, Mathieu, and Morhange. The representation of power in this scene is demonstrated through Rachin's unilateral act of taking Morhange's notebook. Upon discovering a drawing of himself deemed inappropriate, Rachin instructs Mathieu to apply the *Action-Réaction* principle, sentencing Morhange to solitary confinement.



Figure 2. Chabert Enforcing *Action-Réaction* on Mondain (Data C/15, 55.34)

Mathieu: Il a fait quoi?

Chabert: Il m'a volé ma montre dans ma chambre. Je l'ai surpris. Je suis passé voir Rachin. Action – Réaction

Mathieu: Et vous l'emmenez où?

Chabert: Au cachot. 15 jours. Allez!

Data C/15 is a scenario between Chabert, Mondain, and Mathieu that takes place in a school setting and lasts from 55.34 to 55.44. The *Action-Réaction* concept is applied in the conversation between Mathieu and Chabert after Chabert leads Mondain away following a wristwatch theft. Chabert uses the *Action-Réaction* concept because punishment follows every action. The 15-day sentencing symbolizes the institution's complete control over the student's body and psyche in a gloomy, solitary confinement cell.



Figure 3. Rachin's Collective Punishment Scene (Data C/06, 09.31)

Rachin: Silence. J'ajoute que, tant que le coupable ne sera pas connu, la récréation sera supprimée et les visites interdites. Je vous invite donc à le dénoncer au plus vite.

The scene in Data C/06, which takes place in the school courtyard between 09.31 and 09.37, features Rachin and the Fond de l'étang kids. To instill discipline and establish his authority, Rachin uses a collective punishment technique in this scenario. Rachin fosters an environment in which children are under pressure to keep an eye on and report one another, denying them access to recess and school visits. By framing students through acts of betrayal, this semiotically leads to a disintegration of internal cohesion. This technique illustrates how pupils' social cohesiveness is destroyed to reinforce total control alongside written regulations.



Figure 4. Rachin and Mathieu's Punctuality Scene (Data C/01, 06.12)

Rachin: Vous êtes en retard.

Mathieu: On m'a donné le mauvais horaire pour l'autocar.

Rachin: La ponctualité est ici une valeur fondamentale

Data C/01 is a scene involving Rachin and Mathieu that takes place in a school setting and lasts from 06.12 to 06.22. On his first day of work as a supervisor at the Fond de l'étang dorm, Mathieu is shown arriving late in this scene. In addition to reminding Mathieu of his tardiness, Rachin, the dorm director, makes it clear that being on time is a core principle of the school. This claim illustrates how institutional power operates through the unilateral imposition of disciplinary standards by those in positions of authority.



Figure 5. Morhange's Forced Labor Scene (Data C/11, 36.44)

Mathieu (voix off): 8 février, alors que j'attaque les premières répétitions, Rachin s'acharne contre Morhange. A sa sortie du cachot, il le condamne pour exemple à un mois de travaux d'intérêt général.

Morhange balaie les couloirs. Dans la salle d'études, les enfants répètent une nouvelle chanson.

Data C/11 is a scene featuring the character Morhange, set in the school hallway, and runs from 36.44 to 36.52. As an extra punishment for his time spent in solitary confinement, Morhange is shown in this scene scrubbing the school hallway. Morhange shows that his body has been indirectly punished and is no longer able to oppose it, having accepted the punishment without protest. Institutional punishment compliance has become so ingrained that it is considered unquestionable.



Figure 6. Garde à vous scène (12.48)

Il réussit à l'arracher des mains d'un élève quand Rachin fait son apparition dans la salle d'études. Tous les enfants se lèvent et se mettent au garde à vous en le voyant.

Rachin: Ça commence bien. Mes compliments Mathieu. (aux élèves) Assis! (à l'élève qui se tient debout près de Mathieu)

Data C/08 is a scene set in a classroom that features Rachin, Mathieu, and the students. It lasts from 12.48 to 12.57. When Rachin arrives, all the students in this scene automatically stand at attention. This illustrates how students' bodies have internalized institutional discipline, making obedience an instinctive response to authority rather than requiring explicit directives.

Among the sequences examined, profanity, physical violence, and the penalties meted out are examples of how authority is portrayed in the movie *Les Choristes*. Power and discipline in the film *Les Choristes* do not operate separately; they are interrelated. The

institutional power wielded by Rachin creates a disciplinary mechanism that each student internalizes. This is evidenced by students' automatic obedience to explicit commands, demonstrating that power has successfully shaped disciplined bodies.

This finding is consistent with Roland Barthes' analysis of six scenes in the film *Les Choristes*, in which representations of power are manifested through three mechanisms: instant punishment without due process reflecting the *Action-Réaction* principle, the elimination of students' rights as a tool of collective pressure, and the execution of punishment carried out through the hierarchy of institutional staff. Meanwhile, discipline is manifested through the normalization of institutional values such as punctuality, the use of forced labor to reshape the bodies of those who violate norms, and students' unintentional physical responses to commands.

At the level of myth, both categories overlap considerably, consistently naturalizing the notion that institutional power is ordinary and beyond question, and that bodily submission is a normal state of order. This is consistent with Foucault's concept of docile bodies, physical responses successfully constructed by institutional disciplinary mechanisms, as well as the concept of normalization, whereby such conditions are realized as a general truth that need not be questioned.

Thus, the film *Les Choristes* represents power and discipline as two interrelated elements in constructing and maintaining the authority of educational institutions over individual conduct.

Conclusion

The analysis of the representation of power and discipline in the film *Les Choristes* (Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis) yields the following findings:

1. The analysis of power practices is demonstrated through the application of the *Action-Réaction* principle by Rachin, as the headmaster, and Chabert, as the institutional supervisor. This principle treats punishment as an automatic response to violations, without investigation or defense by the accused.
2. The analysis of disciplinary practices shows that they operate through the internalization of institutional norms within students' characters, so that compliance no longer requires explicit coercion and has become an automatic part of their behavior.

Roland Barthes' semiotic approach, along with Foucault's framework, proved effective in elaborating the analysis of power and discipline through visual and verbal signs in the film *Les Choristes*, reinforced by Foucault's theoretical framework through three main concepts. First, power (*pouvoir*) is evidenced through the *Action-Réaction* principle as a form of institutional domination. Second, the concept of discipline is shaped by the regulation and normalization of students' behavior. Third, docile bodies are evidenced by the students' spontaneous physical response of obedience upon the arrival of those in power.

Declarations

Author contribution. We made substantial contributions to the conception and design of this study. Triana Fatmawati served as the primary author and conducted the core research by analyzing the selected film using the referenced theories. Additionally, she took the initiative to interpret the analytical results and present them in a well-organized written piece. As the supporting author, Aisyiah Al Adawiyah offered knowledgeable advice during the film analysis. Finally, she provided critical mentorship and closely assisted with the preparation and final draft compilation of the manuscript.

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Conflict of interest. We affirm that they have no conflicts of interest, personal or financial. No person or group has influenced the results or interpretations offered in this study. We are not connected to any company with a direct financial stake in the topic. Employment, consultancies, stock ownership, or honoraria do not bias this work. The study was carried out impartially and without any possible conflicts of interest.

Additional information. To fulfill the academic criteria for graduation from our connected university program, this article was written and submitted. The study is a crucial part of the last academic requirement to earn the degree. The body of the manuscript contains all the key results and supporting information for this academic research. For this study, no external appendices or other online data sources have been developed. Readers can contact the appropriate us directly for further information about the institutional setting of this work.

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