

Representations of Childhood in Crisis Discourse: A Visual and Linguistic Semiotic Reading of the Documentary Film "Children of ISIS: No Hope for the Future"

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Abstract—This paper utilizes a combination of linguistic and visual analysis to examine the semiotic constructions of childhood in the documentary "Children of ISIS: No Hope for the Future," employing a blend of linguistic and visual analysis. The study employs qualitative methods to examine the film's visual and verbal discourse, building on the semiotics of Saussure, Peirce, Barthes, and Kristeva. The study posits that documentary discourse functions not only as a presentation of reality, but also as a symbolic reconstruction of it. For instance, the term "ticking bombs" has been employed to frame children within a charged security discourse. Furthermore, the image itself conveys meaning through composition, lighting, and angle, contributing to semantic tension. Intertextuality plays a significant role in unraveling the paradox between asserted juridical imperatives and *vita activa*. The study posits that journalists and media creators can influence the media's portrayal of children by deconstructing and reconstructing media narratives with semiotic awareness. The objective of this initiative is to establish alternative narratives that place the voices and rights of children at the forefront, ensuring that they are fairly and humanely represented.

Index Terms—docudiscourse, semiotics, image analysis, language analysis

I. INTRODUCTION

The article analyzes the linguistic and visual semiotics of the documentary "Children of ISIS: No Hope for the Future," produced by Deutsche Welle (2022). The film chronicles the lives of children born or raised under the Islamic State who are currently residing in refugee camps in northern Syria, documenting their struggles in the face of challenging conditions. These children have not chosen their circumstances and are frequently perceived as potential threats rather than victims in need of protection. The film draws attention to the legal precariousness of these individuals, their lack of formal identification, and the reluctance of numerous regional governments to facilitate their repatriation. Consequently, the film functions not merely as a visual depiction of a traumatic event but rather as a complex human narrative that addresses suffering through a rich visual and linguistic semiotic system replete with meaning. In the discourse surrounding the documentary, oral and voice-over storytelling, texts, images, symbols, signs, and figures intertwine in an interactive matrix conveying ethical, political, and cultural messages. A semiotic analysis is therefore required to examine its

structure, identify the mechanisms that create meaning, understand the bonds of this interaction, and observe how language and images work together to construct not just news but also a compelling, guiding, and responsible narrative.

The study's theoretical framework is based on several innovative semiotic theories. It begins with Ferdinand de Saussure's semantic dualism (Saussure, 1983), which distinguishes between the signified and the signifier. This theory explains the production of meaning as an arbitrary connection between linguistic form and mental concepts within a cultural and social system. The framework also incorporates Charles Sanders Peirce's triadic model of semiotics (Peirce, 2014), which recognizes the sign as an index or symbol and introduces the interpretant as the part of the model through which meaning is understood in a specific context. The analysis of the linguistic and cultural levels of meaning production utilizes Roland Barthes's concepts of denotation and connotation, illustrating how a sign can carry implicit connotations beyond its surface meaning. The study references Julia Kristeva's concept of intertextuality (Kristeva, 1980), which emphasizes the interconnectedness of texts and how discourse references and alludes to other texts to enhance or redefine meanings. The visual analysis follows the approach of Tran (2017), treating images as a semiotic system similar to language, with rules of interaction involving composition, lighting, color, and the visual presentation of the message.

This study presents a combined linguistic and visual analysis of the documentary "Children of ISIS. No Hope for the Future", prepared by Eileen Lam Truong in 2022 and produced by the German channel DW. It is a powerful piece about one of the most complex post-Islamic State (ISIS) humanitarian issues: what to do with children born or raised in ISIS-controlled areas or taken there by parents who later returned. These children now find themselves caught between camps, borders, stigma, and oblivion.

The film repeatedly emphasizes the daily lives of these children inside the Al-Hol camp in northeastern Syria. Al-Hol is a camp for thousands of women and children, many of whom have European or Arab nationalities. They live in a legal, social, and political vacuum. The film follows grandparents from France, Belgium, and Germany as they try to retrieve their grandchildren, who are living in inhumane conditions. Bureaucratic complications and political reluctance from their native countries' governments hinder the process.

The movie focuses more on the profound human dimension of these children than on categorizing them as "ticking bombs" or security threats. Through family testimonies, it sheds light on how many have lost fathers in the war, witnessed the killing of their mothers, or been indoctrinated by the organization at a young age. The film shows the children drawing, playing, and quietly following the organization's orders. Some do not know their country of origin, cannot speak the language, and live with a sense of total fragmentation and a foreign identity. The film uses archival ISIS propaganda footage to illustrate how childhood was exploited in jihadist propaganda. It contrasts this footage with recent photographs from inside the camp to show the deep psychological and existential damage the children have suffered in a harsh legal and political no man's land. A voice-over commentary provides an objective interpretation of the visual narrative while maintaining a strong ethical focus on childhood and human dignity. The commentary employs semiotic devices that juxtapose harsh images with tender statements or legal texts, such as the Declaration of the Rights of the Child, with scenes from the field. This creates a compelling paradox that prompts viewers to engage in critical discourse (DW Documentary, 2022).

Beyond its core message, the film poses an open ethical question: The question of whether children should bear the burden of their parents' transgressions is a contentious one. It is imperative to examine the willingness of Western nations and the global community to assume legal and moral responsibility for these children. The film does not offer a conclusive resolution to these inquiries; rather, it encourages viewers to engage in thoughtful reflection. The text functions as a commentary on global complicity and the childhood suspended between guilt and neglect, war and play, despair and hope.

In line with these inquiries, the authors of the present study have undertaken a comprehensive analysis of the complex discourse created through language and imagery in the documentary "Children of ISIS: No Hope for the Future," which addresses the challenging issue of the future of children of ISIS fighters. In media discourse, children are depicted as both passive victims and potential future perpetrators, a dichotomy that is evident in the visual and linguistic representations. In this context, adopting a semiotic perspective is imperative to comprehend their representation and the layers of meaning generated by the interaction between visual and verbal signs in the documentary.

A central question emerges: What roles do language and images play in reinterpreting the meaning of "ISIS children" within the documentary film? This question is based on the premise that documentary discourse is shaped by more than just explicit statements; visual content, implicit messages, and omissions also play a role. Therefore, semiotic analysis provides a framework for interpreting meanings that may not be apparent to viewers at first glance. Theories such as Ferdinand de Saussure's concept of the "signifier and the signified" explain that meaning arises from the relationship between the different components of the language system rather than from the relationship between a word and a thing. This concept demonstrates how words such as "ISIS," "camp," and "ghosts" acquire new connotations in the film, extending beyond their literal definitions to convey cultural and political implications.

Charles Sanders Peirce's sign model, which has three components — the sign, the object, and the interpretant (Peirce, 1991, 1998) has led to an understanding of the relationship between signs, objects, and interpretants. The model provides a framework for defining how documentary images function as icons that mimic reality (e.g., shots of children drawing or playing), indices that imply a lack of safety and identity security (e.g., barbed wire or worried grandmothers' faces), or symbols that rely on cultural codes for interpretation (e.g., organizational flags or jihadist slogans). This analysis shows

that nothing in the film is mimetic; each shot plays a semantic role that goes beyond mere depiction, altering the viewer's relationship to ethics.

Second, Barthes's (1977) distinction between denotation and connotation entails the difference between an image's or word's apparent and underlying meanings, the latter of which may represent emotion or cultural symbolism. For example, an image of a tent in a refugee camp may represent a temporary haven, but it also symbolizes precariousness, loneliness, and a lack of dignity. The conflict between these two levels creates a symbolic narrative structure that fulfills a critical humanitarian discourse without overt linguistic condemnation or direction. Visual composition alone can guide perception. For example, it can place children in the middle of the frame or use a low angle to capture a shot that emphasizes their fragility or separation from the outside world (Tran, 2017).

These theoretical approaches demonstrate that analyzing documentary cinema requires looking beyond simple content and opening up the visual and linguistic processes of signification, particularly when the subject is victims of armed conflict. Through filmic montage and narrative form, films "recreate" that which is not fully represented but rather symbolized, alluded to, and framed for reception through the superimposition of signs. This is where Kristeva's (1980) concept of intertextuality becomes relevant, not only as the conscious evocation of other texts but also as an indispensable matrix for comprehending cultural and political history and discursive practices. Including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights or reports from the French media is not simply informative; it is constructively destabilizing, creating tensions in meaning between law (ideal) and camp (real) (Angier et al., 2022).

In that regard, this article strives to analyze the verses analytically, taking into account the fusion of text and image and the multiple messages that the interplay creates. This is also attributed to the belief that media discourse about such matters not only articulates an opinion but also creates and builds consciousness by selecting what is presented and what is suppressed. Qualitative semiotic analysis, with its methodological flexibility, can identify these complex narrative structures and reveal their implicit meanings in reframing public opinion and contesting the issue of children in the post-ISIS era.

II. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR VISUAL AND LINGUISTIC SEMIOTIC READING IN THE DOCUMENTARY "CHILDREN OF ISIS"

This research is grounded in a theoretical and epistemological framework of semiosis, which explores how meaning is created and interpreted in media discourse, especially at the intersection of language and imagery in documentary films. These theories offer analytical tools to unpack layers of meaning—both spoken and unspoken, explicit and implicit—and illuminate how these layers interact to produce complex messages. This illustrates how these messages are conveyed and received in the context of a humanitarian crisis, as seen in the documentary "Children of ISIS: No Hope for the Future" (DW Documentary, 2022).

Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure is one of the founders of structural semiotics. According to Saussure's two-part theory of the linguistic sign, a sign consists of two parts: the signifier and the signified (Montaner Bueno, 2020). The signifier is the acoustic or visual representation of a word, and the signified is the mental concept associated with it. Saussure explains that the relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary and constructed within a cultural and social context. In the film, words such as "ISIS" and "camp" have layers of meaning that extend beyond their literal definitions. These words reflect fear, collapse, displacement, and detention. This illustrates how meaning can evolve in response to visual context.

Charles Sanders Peirce developed a tripartite model of signs consisting of representamen, object, and interpretant. He identifies three types of signs: icons, indexes, and symbols. In the documentary, images of children drawing or playing serve as icons of innocence, while visuals of barbed wire and ruined buildings represent harsh realities. Symbols such as flags and slogans introduce political and security themes into the narrative, transcending the immediate imagery (Udilawaty & Hasan, 2022). Roland Barthes distinguishes between denotation and connotation, emphasizing how visual cues, voiceovers, and music come together to form a complete discourse Rustam (Ahmad & Pallawagau, 2024). Semiotics analyzes the visual narrative of documentary films by examining sequences of shots, camera movements, and spatiotemporal structuring to convey complex messages. Intertextuality with legal documents and media texts contributes to a multi-voiced, critical discourse that juxtaposes human rights ideals with reality.

Tran's semiotics of images are applied to analyze the documentary's visual features, emphasizing composition, color, lighting, and camera angles. Through the use of visual language coupled with sound narration and music, the documentary creates nuanced meanings that reflect the ethical and political vision of a contradictory contemporary world (Nelson, 2025). In conclusion, a semiotic approach is an effective research method for analyzing documentary discourse, deconstructing relationships between visual and linguistic signs and understanding how films create meanings that go beyond mere documentation to convey ethical and political messages in a complex world.

III. APPLIED ANALYSIS OF FILM CONTENT AND ITS CONNECTION TO THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The documentary "Children of ISIS: No Hope for the Future" offers a compelling illustration of its central thesis that crisis narratives are not merely neutral or descriptive, but rather, they are profoundly ideological and symbolic in nature. The repeated use of the terms "ISIS," "camp," and "ticking bombs" underscores the manner in which linguistic signs

operate within a culturally determined domain of signification. This notion is rooted in Ferdinand de Saussure's (1983) foundational principle that the association between the physical form of a word or sound (i.e., the signifier) and its conceptual significance (i.e., the signified) is arbitrary and is dictated by social conventions, rather than being determined by inherent meaning.

The acronym "ISIS" in the title not only denotes a terrorist organization but also looms over the children as a shadow of fear and suspicion that they do not deserve. The signifier becomes a symbolic border that distorts sensations, turning children into potential objects of fear by mere association. The term "camp" alone doesn't necessarily imply shelter. As Chandler (2017) and Culler (1986) remind us, words take on meaning based on the discursive contexts in which they are used. In the documentary, "camp" emerges as a metaphor for desertion, exile, social marginality, and invisibility when combined with images of barefoot children ascending through ruins, one tent pitched after another, and razor wire. This stratified semiotic system closely corresponds to Roland Barthes's differentiation between denotation and connotation (Barthes, 1977). While the denotative meaning of "camp" is shelter, its connotative meaning—amplified through sound, image, and editing—is exile, loss, and unbelonging.

The phrase "ticking bombs" is an even more ideologically charged signifier. The allusion to future dangers is quickly expanded upon through the relationship between code and context, creating a semantic field of fear. Children are not presented as refugees of war but rather as potential security threats. Visual montages of children in military fatigues chanting ideology-induced slogans consolidate this verbal framing. These are examples of what Peirce (1991, 1998) called "indices": signs that do not resemble what they represent but rather signal it through a causal or contextual connection. The child ceases to be a human being and becomes an index of future risk, as well as a projection of the social panic visited upon them.

However, the movie does not succumb to this framing. As a critical counterpoint, there is a tender shot of a child sitting quietly on his grandfather's lap after returning from Syria (see Figure 1). There is no voice-over or dramatic music; only silence and body language remain. According to Davies and Troy (2020), this is where the notion of nonverbal expression becomes relevant. The child's slumped posture and averted gaze indicate trauma, loss, and vulnerability—emotions that the security discourse cannot handle. The disjunction between the discourse of fear and the visual grammar of care creates a "semiotic antithesis," as Barthes would call it—two contradictory sign systems that coexist and demand reflection from the viewer.

The generative tension between opposing textual and visual codes is further complicated here by intertextuality, which is a particularly incisive way this film engages with prior discursive traditions. According to Julia Kristeva's 1980 formulation, all texts are in an "intertextual" relationship with one another. The film opens with a direct quotation from the 1959 Declaration of the Rights of the Child, which states that every child has the right to a name, nationality, and protection. This humanist and universalist legal slogan is immediately juxtaposed with the image of stateless children behind fences. Simply noting this intertextual tension is insufficient; it is merely performative. This statement provokes an ethical question: Why aren't the rights stated here applied to the children seen? It's more than a mere citation; it's discursive irony, an instance in which the film holds institutional speculation accountable through visual counter-narratives. The film contrasts ISIS's visual propaganda depicting children with weapons with images of children drawing, playing, eating, and sleeping, employing what Graham Allen has termed "polyphonic intertextuality." In this narration, different voices—from familial to state, media, and extremist ideology—converge and collide. Meaning is contested rather than centered, leaving room for viewers to create meaning and register ethically and effectively. By combining visual images, linguistic signs, and textual references, the film places the so-called simple binaries of victim/threat, childhood/ideology, and innocence/danger within a dynamic semiotic field. In this field, meaning is produced rather than given, making the viewer an agent in the ethical and aesthetic interpretation of childhood in crisis.



Figure 1. A Still From the Documentary Film "Children of ISIS: No Hope for the Future", produced by the German institution DW, taken at minute 49.52, shows the French grandfather with his grandchild who has returned from Syria. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kj4FXYy7o6k>

In film, the image is not merely illustrative or supplementary to the verbal; it is an alternative system of meaning. Through composition, color, lighting, and perspective, film creates a visual grammar that operates according to its own logic. This visual grammar conveys meanings that are more tender and spontaneous than those of any spoken language. This method is based on the theoretical findings of Kress and van Leeuwen (2021), who argue that images are not neutral reflections of nature but rather structured, symbolic representations driven by the semiotic ordering of relations, orientation, and interpretation.

Throughout the film, one of its most resonant early images reappears: a child standing alone in the middle of an open area filled with row upon row of gray tents deep within the al-Hol camp (see Figure 2). Positioned in the middle of the frame from the outset, the child appears to hold some significance in the narrative. However, centrality does not mean power here. Rather, it signifies isolation and abandonment, a concept consistent with Kress and van Leeuwen's model of "information value," wherein spatial location has no inherent meaning, acquiring significance in relation to other on-screen elements. There are no defined edges, no traces of civilization, and no signs of life. In contrast, what remains is a metaphorical desert, an image of exile and in-betweenness. The picture is framed in a way that suggests what we might call the "visual framing of marginalization," where the absence of life becomes a sign unto itself.

This rhetoric of space is reinforced by color schemes. The dusty brown, bleached gray, and sunburnt yellow palette conveys a scene of dryness, immobility, and emotional numbness. These dull hues serve as a metaphor for the space's lifelessness and despondency. Occasional archival elements or children's drawings provide the only contrasts, offering bursts of high-impact color that announce a lost past or imagined future. Thus, color in the film operates as a temporal and affective signifier that signifies the distinction between pre-war innocence and post-war trauma, memory, and abandonment.

Lighting is also used as a psychological and ideological weapon. Interviews in the camp are starkly lit from above, casting deep shadows that accentuate the lines, fatigue, and psychological distress evident on the faces of parents and caregivers. In one particularly affecting scene, a grandmother speaks from behind a metal fence; the overhead light casts bar-like shadows across her face. Here, light becomes a visual analog of imprisonment—a form of what Charles Sanders Peirce would describe as an "indexical sign": a sign that does not resemble what it refers to but indicates it (Peirce, 2014). These shadows are not literal, but they symbolize disconnection, transforming physical light into a vehicle for meaning.

The film also uses symbolic visual signs to represent violence and traumatic experiences. There are no gratuitously graphic depictions of war and bombing. Instead, it draws from the debris of conflict: billowing dust, orange skies, and flickering flames. These are not representations of violence; rather, they evoke an affective afterimage of violence, serving as iconic and indexical signs of a history of horror. Smoke, for example, is a metaphor for memory—here and now, unfolding but also vanishing.

The audience's perception of the film can also be shaped by the camera angles used to film the subjects. For example, low-angle views of children can hint at their vulnerability and dependence, which puts the viewer in a patronizing yet sympathetic position. Conversely, high angles of surveillance towers, fences, or desolate landscapes create an air of authority, threat, and distance. This visual dichotomy complements the movie's political undertone, balancing vulnerability with raw systems of power. When the children first enter, they are not only small in stature, but they are also dwarfed by the watchtowers and fences of the control structure.

Most powerfully, however, many of these images are not supported by a verbal narrative. This allows the rawness of what is seen to communicate directly. This interpretive silence aligns with Barthes's (1977) assertion that images bear multiple meanings, some of which are untranslatable into language. A shot of a child with his back to the camera and his hands in the air facing a wall conveys more about grief, trauma, and dislocation than any voice-over or caption could. Barthes stressed that an image's connotative strength lies in the undecidability of meaning and the blank space offered to spectators to complete the image with their own emotions and cultural knowledge.

Overall, the film creates a multilayered visual discourse in which meaning is not only described but also felt, negotiated, and enacted. The image does more than illustrate the spoken word; it often challenges, reconfigures, or extends it. Composition ceases to be a semiotic architecture of pain and displacement. Color defines the split in time and feeling. Light demarcates the edge of exposure and erasure. Angles chart power hierarchies. Silence punctuates the unspeakable. Together, these elements form a semiotic ecosystem in which images and language collaborate to tell a story that is both politically and emotionally charged. This story invites viewers to do more than simply look; it invites them to witness and feel the price of lost childhoods.



Figure 2. A Still From the Film "Children of ISIS: No Hope for the Future," produced by the German institution DW, showing children in Al-Hol camp. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kj4FXy7o6k>

The documentary employs a sophisticated, multilayered semiotic strategy, combining empathetic and juridical speech with the shock and discomfort of the on-screen imagery. This combination is no coincidence; it is a carefully developed semiotic antithesis in the terms of Barthes (1977). In this context, signs do not have a single or stable meaning; rather, they produce multiple and sometimes opposing readings. The meaning of a sign is the entire network of combined signs—verbal or visual—and the context in which they occur; however, it is not limited to their lexical or literal content.

The film contains Grandmother Monique's chilling 3:15 confession: "She's just a child, a real victim. She didn't do anything; she was just born in the wrong place." This linguistic act is used to depict the child as a helpless victim who deserves our sympathy. However, the footage abruptly shifts to archived ISIS footage depicting the same girl in a black uniform singing a militant song in a propaganda setting. This visual counterpoint not only does violence to the language but also reinterprets and destabilizes it. This renders the tidy semantic frame of victimhood unstable and exposes the child as a symbol of both innocence and ideology.

Semiotic dissonance is a rift in semantics where denotation and connotation no longer correspond. The child is no longer merely a "victim" or a propaganda "instrument." Rather, she provokes interpretive tension, requiring viewers to bring cultural, ethical, and political references to bear on their interpretation. This concept aligns with Peirce's (1998) notion of the "interpretant," which posits that meaning is not solely determined by the relationship between sign and object but also by how the observer interprets, contextualizes, and emotionally engages with it.

A similar, though subtler, effect is achieved later in the film when a mother declares, "My child knows nothing but fear. We want a new life for him." At that point, the screen shows the child solemnly looking into the camera in slow motion. However, this scene quickly cuts to other children training and doing military drills under ISIS banners. Once again, a rhetoric of mercy collides with a rhetoric of danger, throwing the viewer into moral and interpretive disarray. Barthes calls this an "active reading" of visual discourse—the spectator does not passively receive a message but must engage with discomfort, contradiction, and reflection to arrive at an "ethical position."

This interpretive ambiguity is enhanced by the film's precise montage and sound design. In one scene, the voiceover laments a humanitarian disaster while the screen goes blank and shows mute ISIS propaganda footage. This suggests that certain traumas are unspeakable and must be seen. Thus, the relationship between images and text in the film is dialectical, producing meaning from opposition and difference.

No scene in the film is more haunting than the one at the 25:35 mark, in which a child, without a mother or siblings, is curled up with his back to the camera, gazing at a gray wall (see Figure 3). His hands are raised with his fingers outstretched toward the wall, as if he is fending off an unseen threat. We do not see his face, and he is neither looking in our direction nor given any verbal cue to continue his lines. Only his body remains, serving as a semiotic site of trauma. This stance is an indexical sign (Peirce, 1991), pointing to the highly subjective psychological trace of trauma rather than miming it. The accompanying voiceover, "His mind is very shaky, baby, ever since we left Baghuz," intensifies the effect of the image. Mentioning Baghuz, a place associated with violent military engagement, situates the trauma in space and time. The raw, everyday quality of the word "baby" imparts emotional intimacy, offering not just testimony but also a wound that is still being experienced.

From a semiotic perspective, this moment activates several interpretive layers:

- Denotation: A child stands with his back against a wall.
- Signification: Withdrawn-ness, fragility, repressed fright, and the metaphorical absence of safety.
- Cultural literacy: The child's posture reflects cultural scripts of shame, punishment, or mourning—a silent, inward curling up.

Barthes (1977, 1991) points out that a picture's power grows when it refuses closure. The child's obscured face compels the audience to supply the missing details, filling the gaps with empathy, guilt, or cultural understanding. This void becomes a site of emotional projection. Color and light intensify the emotional impact. The gray background and balanced, subtle lighting create an atmosphere of tranquility and oppression. The child is both present and absent—physically present, yet emotionally and spiritually absent. The rear-mounted camera angle heightens the voyeuristic aspect, making us feel as if we are intruding on something personal and historical that was never meant to be seen. However, it is precisely

this exposure that transforms the scene into a visual testimony, demanding both an observer and an ethical witness.

This mixture of body, image, and intimate language presents what we could label "the discourse of distilled trauma" (Ghosh Dastidar, 2020) Though there is no violence or screaming, everything on screen conveys the gravity of what has been done. For Peirce, a sign does not represent a thing itself but rather a thing as an effect that can be represented in a system of symbols. Here, the child is not depicted as a biological entity but as a moral and symbolic crisis with "detachment," "silence," and disrepair as its signs, not play and pleasure. In the film, the child is not just a figure but rather plays the role of a witness sign—a living archive of trauma that testifies against the viewer, urging us not to look away but to bear witness. The film's semiotic system forces us to confront what we are seeing and stand up ethically to it. It engages us in a dialectic between the image and conscience—language and silence—between innocence and the weight of history.



Figure 3. A Still From the Film "Children of ISIS: No Hope for the Future," produced by the German institution DW, taken at minute 25.35, showing an orphaned child suffering psychologically after the killing of his mother and brother. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kj4FXYy7o6k>

The documentary "Children of ISIS: No Hope for the Future" employs narrative techniques and functions as a semiotic and rhetorical device, reframing meaning by referencing prior texts and contexts within the contemporary text. Instead of employing intertextuality for the purpose of informative reconstruction, the film utilizes it as a deliberate gesture intended to provoke a state of disbelief in the viewer's perception of objectivity as it pertains to the documentary genre. The film commences with a visual representation of the 1959 Declaration of the Rights of the Child, which asserts the fundamental rights of children, including the right to a name, nationality, and protection. This is followed by the opening narration in white text on a black background, accompanied by a slow, neutral voice, which lends it an official and absolute ethical weight.

The juxtaposition of this text with images of children in dire conditions lacking documents or schooling creates a contrast that initiates intertextuality, as described by Kristeva (1980, p. 37). This legal intertextuality reinforces the film's ethical foundation and prompts viewers to question why the political system selectively activates certain phrases. In this context, intertextuality serves as a means of accountability rather than just clarification.

Scenes from French media outlets such as BFM TV and Le Figaro further emphasize this intertextuality by featuring French citizens concerned about repatriating the children of foreign fighters. While these clips represent the official stance, they are juxtaposed with emotional testimonies from grandmothers and mothers. Together, they highlight the disconnect between political rhetoric and the human reality within the camp. The film incorporates visual intertextuality by including sequences from ISIS propaganda showing children engaging in military activities or handling weapons (see Figure 4). Contrasting these scenes with images of children drawing or sleeping symbolically dismantles the propaganda's ideological message, revealing the dark reality of recruitment and indoctrination.



Figure 4. A Still From the Film "Children of ISIS: No Hope for the Future", produced by the German institution DW, taken at minute 5.21, showing a child carrying a weapon. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kj4FXYy7o6k>

Allen (2022) argues that this kind of intertextuality creates a "polyphonic text," in which no single voice (neither the narrator's nor the guests') is dominant; yet meaning is renegotiated through the interplay of various voices: legal, political, propagandistic, humanitarian, and official media. This plurality creates a broader frame for the event and forms a semantic paradox that challenges viewers to rise above a single story, enabling a genuine critical act. According to Kristeva's (1980) notion of intertextuality, the film does not present language and images as distinct entities. Rather, it constructs new meanings by combining different contexts: the grandmother (humanitarian), the state (political), and the media (incendiary). The result is a semiotic text that remains open to interpretation and ethical responsibility. Thus, intertextuality in the film not only reestablishes the narrative but also reintroduces ethical and political contexts to the subject of the documentary. Each quoted text becomes a charged sign that subverts and contradicts official speech. It points to the contradiction between the assertions made in the name of the child and his real life.

IV. STUDY FINDINGS

The findings of the film analysis indicate that the study transcends the mere deconstruction of the documentary's discursive structure. The results of the study also reveal the ideological and cultural mechanisms through which meaning is produced regarding "childhood in times of crisis" and "this broken, symbolically mined childhood, suspended between biological innocence and collective condemnation." A more thorough examination of these findings can be conducted by referring to the following theoretical models.

First, it is evident that the language in the film is used as a symbolic discriminative tool rather than a mere explanatory or nominative practice. As Saussure (1983) stated, the relationship between the signifier and the signified is "conventional" rather than naturally determined and depends on cultural and social contexts. This is reflected in the use of language such as "ISIS," "camp," and "time bombs." In the title, the term "ISIS" not only isolates the organization but also creates a shadow of fear and stigma around the children, who are already the primary focus. Similarly, the word "camp" shifts from its literal meaning of a shelter to symbolize isolation, deprivation, and estrangement from humanity, particularly in an exilic context. Mweri (2010) supports this interpretation, arguing that facial expressions are understood as signs based not only on their literal meaning, but also on their cultural and suggestive connotations. For example, a French security official's use of the term "time bombs" frames children as threats rather than victims within a security/futuristic discourse. This aligns with Barthes's (1977) discussion of suggestion, which posits that language constructs implicit symbols that influence perception rather than reality.

Secondly, the analysis reveals that the images in the film are significant and do more than just explain language. According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2021), images derive meaning from their color, composition, and angle rather than from a direct representation of reality. For example, images of children crouched down against a wall or behind barbed wire serve as metaphorical signs of isolation, fear, and detachment. According to Peirce's (1991, 1998) model, these elements are icons, indices, and symbols that convey resemblance, causal relationships, and socially agreed-upon meanings. The sleeping child in the portrait of the French grandfather, for example, signifies not just an individual experience but also an index of unacknowledged trauma over time.

Third, the findings highlight the deliberate use of intertextuality in the film to create contrast through allusion and propaganda. The film opens with excerpts from the 1959 Declaration of the Rights of the Child juxtaposed with scenes of stateless, uneducated children, which challenge the text's sentimental tone. Kristeva (1980) noted that every text contains inscriptions of other texts, creating a polyphonic discourse that compels viewers to reassess their relationship to the event. Shocking visual intertextuality, such as juxtaposing ISIS propaganda scenes with images of children drawing or sleeping, creates semiotic oppositions that challenge viewers' perceptions.

Fourth, the study reveals the film's reliance on semiotic absence as a crucial semantic element. Forceville (2016) pointed out that negative signs are less significant than positive ones because the film portrays psychological consequences rather than direct violence. Through body language, silence, and scene construction, the film evokes emotions and invites interpretation, prompting viewers to imagine magnified forms of unseen violence.

V. CONCLUSION

The objective of this analysis is to demonstrate that the DW film "Children of ISIS: No Hope for the Future" is not merely a plea for empathy from television viewers; it is also a rich semiotic text. The interplay among language, images, and intertextual references gives rise to a multifaceted, ideologically charged depiction of childhood in crisis. Utilizing a multilayered semiotic framework grounded in the theories of Saussure, Peirce, Barthes, Kristeva, and Kress and van Leeuwen, the study elucidates that the child in the documentary is depicted not solely as an innocent subject but also as a symbol-laden entity rife with discursive collisions, political anxieties, and ethical struggles.

The findings suggest that the film utilizes language not only as an expressive tool but also as a means of categorization and symbolic positioning. Words such as "ISIS," "camp," and "ticking time bombs" have cultural significance that situates children as potential threats, not just as vulnerable individuals. These findings align with Saussure's concept of the arbitrary nature of signs and resonate with Barthes's ideas on connotation. According to Barthes, the specific meanings of words are shaped by societal codes. Consequently, children are subjected to harsh dual determinacy: denotative innocence and connotative suspicion, making them subjects of both empathy and skepticism.

Visually, the film transcends verbal communication by creating a semiotically equivalent — if not more powerful — secondary narrative. Following the visual design principles outlined by Kress and van Leeuwen, the film uses composition, color, and lighting to construct a visual discourse of isolation, stagnation, and exclusion. Children are often positioned against barren backgrounds, behind wire fences, or amidst desolate, dusty landscapes, implying that central visual placement does not equate to agency but rather amplifies vulnerability. The silent or withdrawn child becomes a semiotic indicator of trauma—an index, in Peirce's terms, a sign causally or existentially linked to its object.

Intertextuality emerges as a critical component in the documentary's ideological construction. References to the Declaration of the Rights of the Child (1959) alongside depictions of stateless, undocumented children in desert camps create a meaningful interplay. This aligns with Kristeva's notion of intertextuality as a relationship that does not independently produce meaning but rather does so through opposition and contradiction. The inclusion of news clippings and jihadi public service announcements prompts viewers to navigate conflicting discourses of justice, fear, and empathy. As Allen suggests, this polyphonic text presents a tapestry of competing voices that requires critical discernment rather than a singular, authoritative narrative.

The film also employs absence as a rhetorical strategy. By refraining from depicting violent imagery and focusing on the psychological aftermath through elements such as silence, posture, and gaze, the film utilizes the semiotics of absence described by Forceville (2016). This approach resists sensationalism, enhancing the emotional impact and urging viewers to imaginatively engage with the unspeakable horror. The child's silent trauma is expressed through posture, setting, and ambiance.

These findings have implications for ethical and communicative strategies when representing children in post-violence scenarios. Whether intentionally or not, the documentary highlights how even well-intentioned portrayals can inadvertently reinforce discursive constraints, reducing the child to a metaphor for broader geopolitical concerns. The study calls for a more critical and self-reflective approach to media production that prioritizes dignity over spectacle, complexity over moral absolutes, and accountability over narrative resolution.

In summary, the present study corroborates the notion that semiotic analysis is a pivotal tool in elucidating the operational mechanisms of media texts and the manner in which they situate their subjects within the confines of ideological frameworks. The depiction of childhood in *Children of ISIS* operates on multiple semiotic levels, including verbal, visual, symbolic, and intertextual elements. These elements complement or challenge one another, creating a complex and multifaceted representation of childhood in the context of ISIS. In this context, the child is not merely a character in a story but rather a discursive construct that shapes and is shaped by the ethical landscapes of crisis media. Documentary filmmakers, media practitioners, and scholars must remain attuned to the nuanced meanings, silences, and audience implications embedded within their narratives.

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