



CLASS STRUGGLE IN *DETROIT* (2017) FILM

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Abstract

The study focuses on *Detroit* (2017) film that tells the story of a true event in Michigan, Detroit 1967. The film delineates the social conflict among White and Black community. The social issues that occur in this film, the researchers see this as a form of social problems related to Marxists. This study uses the Marxist class struggle theory and also uses Barthes' semiotics and cinematography to help researchers analyze research. Class struggle occurs because of conflicts between certain groups for their own interests to achieve freedom in social society. In this study, the data source is taken from *Detroit* 2017 film directed by Kathryn Bigelow produced in America distributed by Annapurna Pictures which becomes the primary data sources. The data collecting technique will be applied as the primary step in doing the research. All data will be collected using some steps to gather comprehensive data that will be meaningful for data analysis. Based on the results of the analysis of class struggle in *Detroit* (2017), the authors found that there were social conflicts that occurred in society. Class struggle occurs because of conflicts between certain groups for their own interests to achieve freedom in social society. The class struggle is depicted through scenes and dialogues in the film, in which the researcher sees a problem between the group of black people and white people.

Keywords: Barthes, class conflict, class struggle, Marxist, semiotic

INTRODUCTION

Literature as one of the major media must have a value including moral value so that a literary work not only gives its readers a pleasure but also provides values and lessons (Mahendra and Amelia, 2020). Literature and film at their core have the same function, namely entertaining and providing something particular insight into the reader or the audience. In popular literature studies, films are literary works. Muller (2006, p. 33) stated that "*Using film as literature still favors students with a strong grasp of narrative analysis skills, for it, focuses mostly on the elements that film shares with literature, not on the unique ways a film expresses its narrative.*" Therefore, the study on film is considered the development of a new form in understanding human life. Through these media, literature learners and researchers are expected to apply literary studies theories easily to grasp what human life issues exist in the film produced by humans. Finally film functions as the media to deliver social issue from humas' has gained its position especially in American film or Hollywood.

This study focuses on *Detroit* (2017) film as an American period crime drama directed by Kathryn Bigelow. This film delineates a snapshot of a real-life event, a police raid on the Algiers Motel in Detroit in 1967. The film started in the setting on Sunday, July 23, 1967. On the 12th Street Riot, there begins a celebration held for black veterans returning home from the Vietnam War. Suddenly, there is a gunshot, and the mob sets fire to several buildings along the street. The city mass seems to panic, and the police or the city's elected official encounters difficulties in handling the riot. The president sends paratroopers into the city to help. After what seems to be sniper fire, police storm the entire scene building. Krauss, the officer in charge has already shot one black looter in the back, and he intends to use all means to learn who it was that shot at the police. He lines up black youths and two white women found with them against the walls of a hallway and unleash a brutal mix of beatings, murder threats, and mock executions. A black security guard, Melvin Dismukes, witnesses the whole scene but later finds himself accused of committing the crimes himself. Those acquitted of the murder resumed their lives with varying degrees of success. The film ends with the characters' exposure to their success. The conflict between Kraus as white people and wrong judgment to black security leads to a riot. This raises the issue on conflict between Black and White people in the U.S.

Regarding the issue of Black people in the U.S., Jalata (2002) stated that the existence of “*the African American movement has sought to redefine the racially distorted black cultural identity, liberate blacks from the racial caste system, and introduce fundamental social transformation in the black community*”. This statement means that the Black has long experienced movement to fight their existence in the U.S. against racial caste system. The recent example can be seen from what happens in the U.S. of BLM (Black Live Matter) movement. In 2020, black man was prosecuted criminal acts committed by the U.S. white policeman. This action leads to death. The movement caused of discrimination action by White group also happens to the Asian American group in the U.S. nowadays. This means that the discrimination and racist action lead to class struggle for minorities group in the U.S., for Black and the Asian people group.

Class struggle and class conflict can happen to different communities, yet both are relate to each other. This conflict motivates some efforts in struggling with their position in the communities. The class struggle at the heart of capitalist society is the logical outcome of a historical process, which would conclude after the working classes seized the modes of production (Selwyn, 2007). The statement implies that class struggles arise from conflict between the ruling and lower classes. The domination of the ruling class appears to rule and exploit the lower classes for a different perspective. Marcus and Menzies (2007) stated, “*social class is essential to understand and organize social change*”. Class struggle is part of perspectives in Marxist theories. Marxism is a theory and a practice united to achieve a classless society. As a theory, Marxism is a body of conceptual tools that means the ruling class of a particular society deploy to hold onto their privileged position in society (Marcus and Menzies, 2007).

The theory of class struggle as a part of Marxist theories can be applied in literary analysis, including Marxist film analysis. Marxist film theory is one of the oldest forms of film theory. Marxist filmmakers, Marxist culture and Marxist theory have profoundly influenced world film culture for over a hundred years, even if this influence is often denied. The struggle for control of the means of film production in the cultural sphere is part of and develops concerning the broader work among the upper classes for the total means of production. Marxist theoretical analysis of movies has developed through cultural products like television, music videos, photography, and novels. Marxist theory tools are considered helpful for understanding the art people consume and enjoy every day and how consumption adds up to a culture (Kornbluh, 2019). Culture is the complex whole that man has acquired as a member of society and the culture shows the result of the behavior and habits of the societies of its place (Efrilia and Setiawan, 2020). The movie has played its role in delivering Marxist issues, such as class struggle which has existed known and developed in many movie productions. It is filmed from different themes, angles, and narratives. The interest on the issues has evolved and it can be seen from the popularity of class struggle studies in film studies. Though some researchers have discussed a lot, the detail of analysis varies from one and another, especially by using Marxist film theory.

This study applied Barthes semiotic and Marxist theories. The studies regarding this issue had been made by Affandi (2016), Kasih and Fitratullah (2018) which emphasizes the issue on class struggle by using Barthes’s semiotic theories. In some extent, class struggle also relates to the minorities issue. Kasih (2018) reveals how minorities takes struggle in living and accomplish the desire as lower class. The previous study on *Detroit* (2017) film focused on violent racism (Setiawan, Hadi and Budiana, 2014) while this study aims to reveal class struggle in *Detroit* (2017) film.

METHOD

In this study, the researcher applied qualitative research. Qualitative means that the analysis based primarily on the constructivist perspective that involves individual experiences that have been historically or socially constructed (Aryangga and Nurmaily 2017). This study used a qualitative approach that focuses on comprehension, description and narattive analysis (Amelia, 2016; Samanik and Lianasari, 2016; Kasih, 2018). In some extent, qualitative analysis considers real phenomenon in the societies as it is found in some researches (Kuswoyo, et.al., 2020; Rido., et.al., 2015). One of the advantages of this form of research is that it might develop a broad issue about a phenomena or event. The researcher applied descriptive method in which it “*adopt a descriptive or interpretative approach which aims to understand and report the views and culture of those being studied*” (Ritchie, 2003). In

this research, the data source was taken from *Detroit* 2017 film directed by Kathryn Bigelow produced in America distributed by Annapurna Pictures.

The primary data were taken from camera angle, lighting, dialogue, narrative, music, etc. delineating class struggle issue in *Detroit* (2017) film.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Detroit (2017) is a film that tells the story of an actual event in 1967 and depicts social problems in America, films that feature racist scenes in the form of physical are shown in this film. The phenomenon of racism that leads to class struggle has long existed in society. Those struggles can be found in the whole of film. In *Detroit* (2017) film, there are scenes delineating class struggle caused of physical violence committed by white police officers. The physical violence influences class struggle from some Black characters in the film. It can be seen from the following scenes.

John Conyers's Social Class and His Class Struggle (Minutes 10.15-10.16)

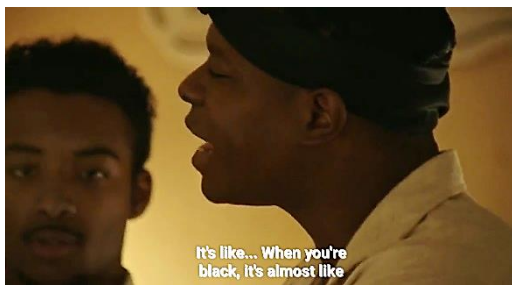


This incident sparks the anger of John Conyers who mobilizes the masses to fight the injustice that has long existed in their city. The denotation of the film taken from both scenes which shows the meeting. There is a narrative speech delivered by John Conyers who said “*This city has problems with the police*”. John Conyers tries to calm the crowd. There is a boisterous voice from the masses who are angry about the situation. The camera is taken from above showing a crowd of black people attending the demonstration led by Johan Conyers. In this scene, it shows everyone is listening to what Conyers said about the problems his people are facing. The camera focuses on the people who look enthusiastic and agreed with what Conyers said.

The connotation of the scenes is that there is a social class led by John Conyers who feels problems between his people, Black community and the police. The statement given by Conyers means dissatisfaction through the condition. The mass crowd who feel ‘agreed’ with Conyers’s statement also delineates dissatisfaction condition with the group of policemen. The presence of so many people at the demonstration led by Johan Conyers shows the existence of injustice. This scene clearly shows symptoms of dissatisfaction which are marked by anger, attendance at demonstrations and approval of the speech given by John Conyers.

The myth is shown from the scene when there is dissatisfaction in one social group, there is class struggle toward it. Dissatisfaction with a situation arises because of the arbitrariness of the rulers who feel they have power to those who do not control the economy. The form of dissatisfaction leads to resistance starting with anger, protest, demonstration and chaos. Marx saw the struggle between classes because of the gap between the conditions of life of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. This also happens because of the increasing homogenization within each class so that the emergence of individual struggles. Awareness of homogenization increases, common interests and policies are regulated, and the use and struggle of political power occurs. Class becomes political force.

Carl Cooper's Class Struggle



45.55



46.27

Denotation in this scene shows some people in the Hotel Motel Algiers. They do deeper discussion as the policeman outside the hotel Algiers wants to attack Black people inside. One of Black man, Carl Cooper said to his friends *"It's like when you're black, it's almost like having a gun pointing right at your face"*. Cooper feels angry about the condition when the policemen are trying to enter into the hotel. On the camera, this angle shows or to describe the current condition or the lens that points to the crowd who is sitting listening to the narrative of the speech or it can be called the "eye level" point of view which is made parallel to the eye or the object being targeted. The people in one of the rooms in the hotel pay attention to the statement given by Cooper. They look 'agreed' of his friends said to them. After making statement, Cooper hurriedly escapes from the room, even though his friends forbid him to leave. Cooper gets shot by White policeman who considers him as the sniper in the hotel.

Connotation in this scene is from Carl Cooper's statement. Cooper feels sad to the condition of prejudice given by White people. Cooper feels intimidated by White people as he said his position as a Black. He thought he only gets gun on his face when he is Black. The word 'gun' usually symbolizes 'hatred, criminal and violent'. Cooper repeats what White people believe on Black people who always correlate to 'hatred, criminal and violent'.

Myth in this scene is taken from Cooper's statement. Having the expression conveyed by Carl shows that there is a belief about human rights that cannot be changed by American society. American society believes that everyone should have the same opportunity to get and achieve an opportunity, but in fact not for black people. The black race is considered to be the lowest race, while the white race is valued higher.

Two Oppositions in Class Conflicts (Minutes 59.03-59.10)



The denotation in this scene begins with the shooting of a white police officer on a black man accused of treason. The scene then focuses on Krauss, as the Michigan State Police arrive at the motel to investigate. Entering the building, Krauss kills Cooper when he tries to escape and plants a knife next to his body as he bleeds to death. The camera in this scene takes turns moving from two rooms, namely the shooting location and the gathering place for other black people accused of treason. A mob of white cops is pictured watching a group of black men facing a wall looking resigned to the accusations. One of them, Krauss, as the chief said, *"We still have a crime scene here"*. The police round up everyone in the hotel and line them against the wall, demanding to know who the sniper is. One of the black police officers, Dismukes, in this scene is seen trying to give an argument about Krauss' arbitrariness or actions.

The connotation in this scene is that the black people are the people who are persecuted and the white police are the ones who have the power. Black people who have no faults surrender and surrender to the situation. This means that black people have realized their position as the loser without any effort to fight back. On the other hand, white police officers feel they have the authority to commit violations within the police, namely shooting without confirming. This action means that they realize that they have more power than black people. This film clearly presents two opposing positions between white people and black people.

The myth that appears on is that arbitrariness occurs when consciousness as a ruler arises. The emergence of this awareness can be caused by history as well as the social environment that shapes it. Kraus's action to shoot and prosecute black people without good reason because of the emergence of prejudice. The initial conclusion about black people as criminals has already been given by Kraus. This causes Dismukes to have resistance or class struggle.

Dismukes's Social Class (Minutes 33.44)



Denotation in this film is found in minute 33.44. Black policeman, Dismukes tries to prevent the violent action between a young Black man and White policeman. Dismukes tries to break up the fight. He also tries to calm this child because this child looks angry with the white policeman. The boy finally looks calm and understands what Dismukes is trying to say. After trying to make peace, he shakes his hands' boy. The young black man then says "Okay, Tom".

Connotation of the scene is that the boy tries to defend his reason and his opinion. On the other hand, Dismukes calms down the boy for his position as policeman to protect his people. The boy suddenly realizes that Dismukes only wants to avoid the Black boy being treated arbitrarily by the black police. In addition, Dismukes asked him to calm down. The black boy finally realizes that Dismukes is a helper as he said, "Thank you, Tom". Tom for black people is seen as a superhero.

Myth in this scene is from the young black man says the word "Tom". "Uncle Tom's Cabin" in the use of this nickname aimed at demeaning black people who are too obedient to skin people. The term is also used to describe a cynical style of behavior towards white people. This designation or nickname refers to black people who use this as a necessary survival technique, choosing to appear docile and indecisive. In African-American, "Uncle Tom" means an African-American who is someone who curates a little bit of self-identity to rely on his status in the white community, aiming to maintain (black) identity. This nickname is also used to describe negatively for someone who betrayed his own group, by participating in oppression.

Dismukes's Class Struggle (Minutes 45.65)



Denotation in this scene is in the police office, in the interrogation room. The camera moves to the black man who is sitting there. He is Dismukes (Black security) who is approached by the police to testify to what happens at the motel that night. In the picture, the camera approaches the interrogation process as Dismukes is being interrogated by the sheriff. The sound background is silent as the sheriff questions him and ask him to provide information or the truth about what happen at the motel that night. It appears that Dismukes has told the truth about what happened at the Motel that

night, but detective says “So, are you lying to us now”. Dismukes says “I’m not lying”, but he has been still considered suspect.

The connotation in this scene is concluded from detective accusation to Dismukes. The detectives who seem to defend their people (white people) where every information given by Dismukes is a lie. This means that the prejudice exists in the interrogation room. The word "lying" indicates that black people are liars. In the scene where Dismukes’s facial expressions show anxiety, fear and a sense of injustice experienced by his people make Dismukes feel disappointed.

This scene shows that there are many defenses made by white people, they always defend as if what people are doing is right, because they think black people are a minority so that white people can freely do unfair actions. We can see this injustice occurs in the law in America, where the law defends the majority, because the majority is considered a super power. Racial discrimination based on differences in skin color is not a new phenomenon in the US, it has even been going on for hundreds of years. Stereotypes of society still think that white people are superior and black people are inferior. The existence of an interrogation conducted by the detective against Dismukes shows a discrimination which shows an attitude of defending his race (white people) as a superior race.

The depiction of stereotypes in this film is seen in this scene. There are stereotypes of white people who think black people are murderers who make Dismukes a suspect. The scene can be assumed that white people view black people as the root of the problems. Dismukes came to the incident at the Motel to break up the violence committed by white police. The incident shows the stereotypes of white people against black people who always think of black people as murderers, criminals, and having bad attitudes until now.

CONCLUSION

Detroit (2017) is a film delineates social problems in society that lead to class struggle. Using Barthes' semiotics and Marxist theories on class, the authors found that there are social conflicts portrayed from some characters. The scenes shows that class struggle occurs because there are groups who want to get freedom in the city of Detroit. The scene also display demo as a form of protest from black people. This demonstration and riot lead to the formation of class struggle carried out by black people. The Black characters also get violence perpetrated by white policeman. Based on the Marxists, the researcher sees this as a form of class struggle, because the class struggle occurs because of a social movement carried out by a group to protest or voice the rights they should get to achieve freedom.

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