

Power relations, institutional violence, and the potential for social change: A study of *D.P. Season 2*

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Abstract

Power relations and institutional violence are frequently represented symbolically in audiovisual media, yet studies linking such representations to their potential for social change remain limited. This study aims to analyze the representation of power relations in *D.P. Season 2* and evaluate its strategic potential to promote social change. A qualitative approach was employed using Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis of five representative scenes, followed by a SWOT-based evaluation. The findings reveal that *D.P. Season 2* represents power relations through structural violence, information manipulation, gender discrimination, and legal injustice legitimized by a hierarchical institutional culture. The SWOT evaluation indicates that these representations have considerable potential to foster public critical awareness, despite limitations in media representation and institutional resistance. This study contributes by integrating semiotic analysis with strategic evaluation to explain the relationship between media representation, power relations, and social change.

Keywords: Power relations; Institutional violence; Semiotics; *D.P. Season 2*; Social change.

Abstrak

Relasi kekuasaan dan kekerasan institusional kerap direpresentasikan secara simbolik dalam media audiovisual. Namun, kajian yang menghubungkan representasi tersebut dengan potensi perubahan sosial masih terbatas. Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis representasi relasi kekuasaan dalam *D.P. Season 2* serta mengevaluasi potensi strategisnya dalam mendorong perubahan sosial. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan analisis semiotika Roland Barthes terhadap lima adegan representatif yang kemudian dievaluasi menggunakan kerangka SWOT. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa *D.P. Season 2* merepresentasikan relasi kekuasaan melalui kekerasan struktural, manipulasi informasi, diskriminasi gender, dan ketidakadilan hukum yang dilegitimasi oleh budaya hierarkis institusi. Evaluasi SWOT memperlihatkan bahwa representasi tersebut memiliki kekuatan dalam membangun kesadaran kritis masyarakat, meskipun masih menghadapi keterbatasan representasi serta resistensi institusional. Penelitian ini berkontribusi dengan mengintegrasikan analisis semiotika dan evaluasi strategis untuk menjelaskan hubungan antara representasi media, relasi kekuasaan, dan perubahan sosial.

Kata Kunci: Relasi kekuasaan; Kekerasan institusional; Semiotika; *D.P. Season 2*; Perubahan sosial.

Introduction

Power relations constitute an inseparable aspect of institutional life because they determine how authority is exercised, decisions are made, and compliance is established within an organization (Kashwan et al., 2019). In practice, unequal distributions of power may give rise to various forms of institutional violence, including abuse of authority, intimidation, discrimination, information manipulation, and the silencing of groups occupying weaker positions (Ricaurte, 2019). Such practices are often legitimized through formal regulations, organizational culture, and continuously reproduced institutional traditions, causing them to be perceived as normal and acceptable. Consequently, violence is no longer understood merely as an individual act but rather as an institutional mechanism that reproduces domination and unequal power relations. This condition indicates that power relations constitute a critical social issue that warrants scholarly attention because of their implications for justice, human rights, and institutional governance.

Institutional violence does not always manifest in the form of physical aggression but is also embedded in structural mechanisms that restrict individual freedom, preserve hierarchical structures, and sustain cultures of unquestioning obedience that leave little room for criticism (Piccone-Camere & Lecaros, 2025). Asymmetrical relationships between those who possess authority and those in subordinate positions enable domination to operate systematically, often without being fully recognized by the actors involved (Wolf, 2019). As a result, victims frequently encounter difficulties in obtaining protection because institutions tend to prioritize organizational stability over exposing internal problems. Therefore, examining power relations and institutional violence is essential for understanding how mechanisms of domination are constructed, maintained, and legitimized through organizational structures and the institutional cultures that evolve within them.

Audiovisual media provide an important space for representing a wide range of social issues, including power relations and institutional violence (Camarero et al., 2019). Through narratives, dialogue, characterization, and visual symbols, media not only depict events but also shape public perceptions of domination, injustice, and the abuse of authority (Recuero, 2024). Such representations enable audiences to understand how power operates through mechanisms that are often invisible in everyday life. One television series that consistently addresses these issues is *D.P. Season 2*, which portrays various forms of institutional violence within the South Korean military. Accordingly, this series was selected as the object of this study to examine how power relations are represented through signs, symbols, and narratives that construct social meaning.

Studies on power relations and institutional violence in audiovisual media have been conducted using diverse analytical approaches. Prathap and Kabaleeswaran (2025)

demonstrated that films and television series represent domination, subordination, and abuses of authority through narrative construction and visual symbolism that foster critical understandings of institutional power. Impara (2018) found that semiotic analysis effectively uncovers the denotative, connotative, and mythical meanings that legitimize different forms of institutional violence. However, most previous studies have focused primarily on symbolic interpretation without explaining its implications for social change. Gerbaudo (2018) began to connect media representation with the formation of public opinion but did not evaluate the strategic potential of media representations in promoting social transformation. Moreover, studies specifically examining power relations in *D.P. Season 2* remain limited, leaving considerable room for more comprehensive investigation.

Against this background, the present study aims to analyze the representation of power relations in *D.P. Season 2* using Roland Barthes' semiotic approach to uncover the denotative, connotative, and mythical meanings constructed through the series' key scenes. In addition, this study evaluates the strategic potential of these representations in promoting social change through the SWOT framework, thereby extending the discussion beyond symbolic interpretation to explain its broader social significance. The significance of this study lies in its effort to expand scholarship on the relationship between media representation, power relations, and institutional violence while offering an evaluative perspective on the contribution of audiovisual media to fostering critical awareness of institutional domination. The findings are expected to enrich the fields of media studies, semiotics, and sociology, as well as provide a valuable reference for future research.

Method

This study employed a qualitative approach using semiotic analysis to examine the representation of institutional violence and power relations in *D.P. Season 2* (Krippendorff, 2019). The research object was the six-episode television series *D.P. Season 2*, while the units of analysis focused on scenes, dialogues, visual expressions, and narrative elements that explicitly or implicitly represent practices of institutional violence. Data were collected through documentation by repeatedly observing each episode and identifying scenes relevant to the research focus. The collected data were then purposively selected, resulting in five representative scenes that served as the research corpus, each representing structural violence, information manipulation, gender discrimination, information control, and legal injustice.

The data were analyzed through several interrelated stages. The initial stage involved identifying and classifying the data according to the emerging representational themes. Each selected scene was subsequently analyzed using Roland Barthes' three levels of signification—denotation, connotation, and myth (Barthes, 1977). The interpretations derived from all scenes were then synthesized to identify patterns in

the representation of institutional violence and power relations constructed throughout the series. To strengthen the discussion, the synthesized findings were further evaluated using the SWOT framework to identify the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of *D.P. Season 2* in promoting social change. In this study, SWOT functioned as an evaluative framework during the discussion stage rather than as the primary research method.

Results and Discussion

Representation of institutional violence and power relations in *D.P. Season 2*

The representation of institutional violence in *D.P. Season 2* is constructed through a series of visual, verbal, and narrative signs that not only depict bullying within the South Korean military but also construct power relations that sustain a culture of violence as something perceived as normal. From Barthes' (1977) perspective, the meaning of a sign develops from denotation to connotation and ultimately forms myths that naturalize particular ideologies. Accordingly, the interpretation of each scene in this study extends beyond what is visibly presented on screen to reveal how the series critiques mechanisms of institutional domination through symbols, dialogue, characters' actions, and visual composition. Consistent with Hall (1997), representation is understood as a process of meaning production shaped by social and cultural contexts, while Fiske (1987) conceptualizes audiovisual elements as a system of signs through which media can critique social reality. Based on this theoretical framework, the analysis focuses on five purposively selected representative scenes that portray institutional violence and power relations throughout the narrative of *D.P. Season 2*.

Table 1. Research corpus of representative scenes in *D.P. Season 2*

Episode	Representative scene	Main issue
Episode 1 – <i>The Rains</i>	Kim Ru-ri's shooting	Accumulated bullying and structural violence
Episode 2 – <i>Dirty Play</i>	Press conference and command room	Information manipulation and abuse of power
Episodes 3–4 – <i>Curtain Call</i>	Bullying of Jang Sung-min (Nina)	Discrimination and hegemonic masculinity
Episode 5 – <i>An-nyeong</i>	USB containing confidential military documents	Information control and concealment of facts
Episode 6 – <i>Day</i>	The trial of Park Beom-gu	Legal injustice and institutional impunity

Source: Compiled by the authors based on the television series *D.P. Season 2* directed by Han Jun-hee and written by Kim Bo-tong (2023).

In Episode 1 (*The Rains*), the narrative opens with Kim Ru-ri entering a classroom carrying a K2 rifle after enduring years of bullying within the military. At the denotative level, the scene portrays a soldier whose body bears physical injuries and emotional trauma before he opens fire on his fellow soldiers. However, its meaning extends beyond the depiction of an individual's criminal act. When Kim Ru-ri's facial expressions, physical scars, the silence of the classroom, and the presence of the rifle are interpreted within the context of the military's seniority culture, these signs develop into the connotation that his actions represent the cumulative suffering produced by an institutional system that continuously permits violence while failing to protect its victims. This connotation subsequently gives rise to the myth that violence constitutes a normal stage in cultivating military discipline, loyalty, and psychological resilience.

According to Barthes (1977), myth operates by transforming ideological constructions into phenomena that appear natural and therefore remain largely unquestioned. In this scene, the naturalization of violence not only explains why bullying continues to be reproduced but also obscures institutional responsibility behind individual actions. This semiotic interpretation aligns with Galtung's (1990) concept of structural violence, which argues that suffering may be produced by unequal social structures without necessarily resulting from direct institutional actions. Accordingly, *D.P. Season 2* portrays Kim Ru-ri not merely as a perpetrator of violence but as the consequence of an institutional system that has failed to fulfill its protective responsibility toward its members.

Unlike Episode 1, which emphasizes the consequences of violence for its victims, Episode 2 (*Dirty Play*) illustrates how institutions preserve their legitimacy through the management of information and public image. The scene depicting General Gu Ja-woon publicly delivering an apology to the media while simultaneously instructing his subordinates in the command room to conceal the autopsy results and shift responsibility onto the victim denotatively presents two actions performed by the same character in different settings. However, when these scenes are interpreted as a unified system of signs, they generate the connotation that the empathy displayed before the public functions primarily as a strategy of political communication rather than an expression of genuine moral responsibility. At the same time, information control operates as a mechanism through which institutional authority is preserved while restricting public access to the truth.

This process of signification subsequently constructs the myth that state bureaucracy always functions objectively, transparently, and in the public interest, whereas the narrative of the series reveals that such an image is produced through the concealment of facts. Barthes (1977) argues that myths naturalize ideological constructions, causing inherently political power relations to appear as ordinary administrative procedures.

This semiotic interpretation is further reinforced by Foucault (1975), who identifies control over knowledge and information as a primary source of power, while Weber (1978) demonstrates that bureaucratic rationality may become an instrument of domination when rules and procedures are designed to protect organizations rather than uphold justice. Consequently, *D.P. Season 2* represents information manipulation not as an individual deviation but as an institutionalized practice of power embedded within the military bureaucratic system.

If power in Episode 2 is exercised through information control, Episodes 3–4 (*Curtain Call*) demonstrate that institutional violence also operates through identity construction and gender discrimination. The experiences of Jang Sung-min, known by the nickname Nina, become the focal point of the narrative as he is subjected to persistent ridicule, intimidation, and social exclusion for failing to conform to the standards of masculinity upheld within the military. At the denotative level, these scenes depict verbal abuse, degrading treatment, and continuous pressure for Nina to conform to behaviors regarded as appropriately masculine. However, these interconnected signs develop into the connotation that the discrimination he experiences is not merely an interpersonal conflict but rather the consequence of an institutional culture that positions masculinity as the primary criterion of legitimacy for military personnel.

This interpretation gives rise to the myth that only individuals who conform to the dominant standards of masculinity are worthy of acceptance within the military institution, whereas those with different identities are constructed as deviations that threaten group solidarity. Barthes (1977) argues that such myths render socially constructed notions of gender as natural and beyond question. This perspective is further enriched by Butler (1990), who conceptualizes gender as an identity continuously produced through social practices, while Connell (2005) explains that hegemonic masculinity maintains its dominance by subordinating alternative forms of masculinity. Accordingly, *D.P. Season 2* portrays discrimination against Nina not merely as the result of individual prejudice but as a representation of institutional mechanisms that reproduce gender hierarchies as an integral component of power relations within military life.

The shift in focus from gender-based discrimination to the control of information becomes evident in Episode 5 (*An-nyeong*), where a USB drive containing confidential military documents concerning various institutional violations becomes the object of intense contestation among multiple actors. At the denotative level, the scene portrays the search for, concealment of, and transfer of the USB drive containing evidence of abuses of authority, alongside institutional efforts to prevent the documents from becoming publicly known. However, when interpreted within the broader narrative, the USB drive no longer functions merely as a data storage device but instead acquires

the connotation of knowledge possessing the power to undermine institutional legitimacy.

The efforts of various actors to obtain or eliminate these documents demonstrate that information is not merely a collection of facts but also a source of power that determines who has the authority to define truth within the public sphere. This process of signification subsequently produces the myth that institutional stability can only be maintained through secrecy and restricted access to sensitive information. Barthes (1977) explains that myth functions by transforming politically motivated practices into seemingly rational administrative measures undertaken for the common good. This interpretation is further reinforced by Castells (2010), who argues that within the network society, control over information flows constitutes a form of power that determines an actor's capacity to maintain dominance. Consequently, *D.P. Season 2* represents information control as a principal instrument of institutional violence that enables abuses of power to persist without effective public oversight.

The entire sequence of institutional violence and power relations reaches its climax in Episode 6 (*Day*) through the trial of Park Beom-gu, which becomes a site of contestation between the pursuit of justice and institutional interests. At the denotative level, the scene depicts courtroom proceedings, witness testimonies, and legal processes intended to determine accountability for the violations that had previously been concealed. However, when these signs are interpreted more deeply, the trial represents not only the operation of the legal system but also constructs the connotation of how institutions seek to preserve their authority through symbols of legality. The courtroom, judges, military uniforms, and legal procedures collectively create the impression that justice is being served, even though underlying power relations continue to shape the judicial process.

This interpretation ultimately produces the myth that the legal system always operates impartially and is capable of delivering justice to all parties. Barthes (1977) argues that such myths conceal the ideological dimensions underlying symbols of legality, leading the law to be perceived as an entirely objective mechanism. This analysis is further enriched by Bourdieu (1987), who conceptualizes the legal field as a site for the production of symbolic power, where legitimacy is constructed through institutional authority and legal discourse. Accordingly, *D.P. Season 2* not only criticizes individual failures in the administration of justice but also demonstrates how symbols of legality can be employed to sustain institutional domination while simultaneously constraining the realization of substantive justice.

Strategic potential of *D.P. Season 2* in promoting social change

The representation of institutional violence in *D.P. Season 2* demonstrates that violence within the South Korean military does not emerge as a series of isolated individual acts but is instead produced through mutually reinforcing power relations, seniority

culture, information control, gender discrimination, and legal legitimacy. These interconnected representations reveal that the series not only exposes social realities but also offers a critical examination of the institutional mechanisms that sustain systemic violence. Consequently, the central question extends beyond how these meanings are constructed to whether such representations possess the capacity to promote social change beyond the narrative itself. Habermas (1989) argues that media can expand the public sphere by fostering public discourse, while Freire (1970) regards critical consciousness as the foundation of social transformation. On this basis, the strategic potential of *D.P. Season 2* is evaluated using the SWOT framework to assess the series' capacity to strengthen public awareness of institutional violence.

Table 2. SWOT matrix of *D.P. Season 2* in promoting social change

SWOT Dimension	Strategic Analysis
Strengths	Presenting institutional violence as a systemic rather than individual problem; revealing the interconnectedness of power relations, information control, gender discrimination, and legal injustice; humanizing victims through realistic and emotionally engaging narratives; stimulating critical reflection on institutional accountability and social justice.
Weaknesses	Fictional narratives cannot fully capture the complexity of institutional realities; audience interpretations are shaped by diverse sociocultural, political, and ideological backgrounds; limited capacity to directly influence institutional policies and structural reforms; narrative compression may simplify multifaceted social and legal issues.
Opportunities	Expanding public discourse on institutional violence and military reform; supporting human rights education and critical media literacy; strengthening academic discussions and interdisciplinary research on institutional accountability; encouraging collaboration among educators, civil society organizations, and policymakers to promote social awareness.
Threats	Institutional resistance toward critical narratives that challenge established authority; persistence of hierarchical and violence-tolerant organizational cultures; political polarization in interpreting military and national security issues; declining public engagement as media attention shifts toward emerging social issues.

Source: Authors' synthesis based on the research findings and supporting literature.

The SWOT matrix presented in Table 2 was developed as a synthesis of the overall research findings to evaluate the strategic potential of *D.P. Season 2* in promoting social change. Unlike the semiotic analysis, which focuses on the construction of meaning through signs and representation, this matrix directs the discussion toward the practical implications of those representations for society. Weihrich (1982) explains that SWOT is an evaluative framework integrating internal and external factors to assess an object's capacity to achieve specific objectives. In this study, the *strengths* and *weaknesses* represent the internal characteristics of the series, whereas the *opportunities*

and *threats* describe external conditions that may either strengthen or constrain the contribution of *D.P. Season 2* as a medium for fostering public awareness, critical reflection, and discourse on institutional reform.

The representation of institutional violence throughout the series gives *D.P. Season 2* considerable strength as a medium capable of connecting individual experiences with broader social issues. This strength lies not only in its willingness to address sensitive topics but also in its ability to demonstrate how seniority culture, abuse of authority, information manipulation, gender discrimination, and legal injustice collectively sustain cycles of institutional violence. Habermas (1989) argues that media expand the public sphere by bringing public issues into collective discussion, while Freire (1970) maintains that critical consciousness emerges when individuals are able to interpret social realities through critical reflection. Similarly, Jenkins and Powers (2025) argue that television series do more than merely convey information; they cultivate empathy and encourage reflection on the need for institutional reform.

Despite its strengths as a medium of social critique, the effectiveness of *D.P. Season 2* is constrained by several limitations. As a work of fiction, the series cannot fully capture the complexity of institutional realities, allowing audiences to interpret its narrative through diverse personal experiences, ideological perspectives, and sociocultural backgrounds. Hall (1980), through the encoding–decoding model, argues that media meanings are not always received as intended by their producers but are instead negotiated or even rejected by audiences. In contrast to Jost et al. (2018), who regard media as a relatively effective instrument of social change, the findings of this study suggest that the series' capacity to foster public awareness does not automatically translate into attitudinal change or institutional policy transformation.

The greatest opportunity offered by *D.P. Season 2* lies in its ability to expand discourse on institutional reform across diverse social spheres, ranging from academia and civil society organizations to digital communities. By addressing institutional violence and abuses of power, the series creates opportunities for cross-sector dialogue on human rights, accountability, and more inclusive models of institutional governance. Rogers (2003) explains that the diffusion of new ideas is strongly influenced by communication channels, while Tarrow (2011) emphasizes the importance of public issues as catalysts for social mobilization. The findings of this study extend those of Li and Chang (2023) by demonstrating that popular media can function as a catalyst for accelerating the diffusion of social awareness, although meaningful societal change still requires the active involvement of multiple actors and institutions.

At the same time, this potential faces several external threats that may reduce its effectiveness in promoting social change. Entrenched hierarchical cultures, institutional resistance to criticism, societal polarization, and the rapid shift of public attention toward emerging issues all constrain the influence of media on sustained

institutional reform. Fraser (1990) argues that not all social groups have equal opportunities to influence the public sphere, while Putnam (2000) emphasizes that social change depends on social capital in the form of trust and collective participation. Although Leong et al. (2019) argue that digital media can strengthen social movements, the findings of this study indicate that the effectiveness of critical media representations ultimately depends on the readiness of social and political structures to accept and act upon such criticism.

The strategic value of *D.P. Season 2* lies not in its capacity to resolve institutional violence directly but in its role as a medium that expands public awareness and encourages critical reflection on practices that have long been regarded as normal. The SWOT analysis indicates that the series' internal strengths are supported by substantial external opportunities, yet these advantages remain constrained by representational limitations and broader structural barriers within society. Touraine (1981) explains that social change emerges through the interaction between collective consciousness, social actors, and contested power structures. Accordingly, *D.P. Season 2* can be positioned as a catalyst for public discourse that contributes to opening space for institutional reform, although substantive change ultimately requires sustained political commitment, active public participation, and long-term policy support.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that *D.P. Season 2* represents institutional violence as a systemic phenomenon rather than merely the consequence of individual actions. Through Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis, the series reveals how power relations, seniority culture, information control, gender discrimination, and legal legitimacy interact to reproduce violence within the South Korean military. These representations illustrate how denotative meanings develop into connotations that critique institutional mechanisms before ultimately constructing myths that normalize violence as an integral part of organizational culture. The subsequent strategic analysis using the SWOT framework further indicates that *D.P. Season 2* has considerable potential as a medium for fostering public awareness, expanding discourse on institutional reform, and encouraging critical reflection on the importance of accountability and the protection of human rights. Accordingly, the series functions not only as a product of popular culture but also as a medium that connects audiovisual representation with broader efforts to promote social change.

The primary contribution of this study lies in integrating Barthes' semiotic analysis with a SWOT-based strategic evaluation to explain the relationship between media representation and the potential for social change, thereby extending scholarship on television series as a medium for critiquing institutional violence. This integrated approach offers a perspective that moves beyond interpreting symbolic meanings to evaluating the broader social implications of media representation. Nevertheless, this

study is limited by its focus on a single television series and its qualitative research design, which does not capture audience responses or the tangible effects of media representation on policy change and social behavior. Future research is therefore encouraged to combine representational analysis with audience reception studies, cross-media or cross-national comparative analyses, and quantitative or mixed-methods approaches to develop a more comprehensive understanding of how audiovisual media influence public opinion, critical consciousness, and processes of social change.

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