

# **A Semiotic Analysis of War Life Representation in the Event of World War I: Operation Alberich on Cinematographical Elements of One-Shot Technique in Sam Mendes' 1917 (2019)**

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## **Abstract**

*This research is conducted to analyze the cinematographical elements revealed in Sam Mendes' 1917 (2019) movie and the war life in the World War I represented in 1917 (2019). There are two problem statements that the researcher used in this research, first, how do cinematographical elements in One-Shot Technique present war life?? Second, how is war life reflected in the Sam Mendes' 1917 (2019)?? The researcher used the qualitative method to examine the problem. The theory and approaches that the researcher used is Cinematographical Elements and Semiotic. This study also includes the procedures of collecting data and procedure of analyzing data. The result of this study, first, Cinematographical Elements provide signs of war life, second, Semiotic explained about the war life of soldiers and civilians in Operation Alberich in the era of World War I.*

**Keywords:** *one-shot Technique, cinematographical elements, semiotic*

## **Introduction**

With the development of the times, mass communication is forced to develop faster with the emergence of the internet as part of the mass media. This internet has been able to overcome the space and time of the information dissemination process in this world. The dissemination of entertainment, information and mass communication media, includes film. The dissemination of information is through the internet such as platforms that offer movie watching through streaming.

*1917* is a film about a war drama released in 2019 directed by Sam Mendes. The film has a remarkably close relationship with World War I, military operation inspired Sam Mendes to direct *1917* film. World War I was a phenomenal with initial problems motivated by the desire of Western countries to

gain hegemony of power over other countries. An operation that inspired 1917 was a German military operation called Operation Alberich, an operation involving Britain-France and German located in France. This operation was a German strategy to draw troops back, thus trapping the Britain-France troops when attacking German territory in France.

## **Literary Review**

### **Semiotics**

Etymologically, the term semiotic is derived from the Greek term *semion* which mean sign. According to Chandler (2002: 2) semiotics is considered as the theory of the production and interpretation of meaning. Meaning is created through the distribution of actions and objects that function as "signs" in relation to other signs. Usually, meaning is not believed to reside in any, text, object or process. Instead, meaning emerges during the communication process itself.

#### **Semiotics of film**

Semiotics of film is a term used to refer to the investigation of how the meaning of films is created and communicated through signs. According to Metz (1974: 96) communication of film divided into two, denotatively and connotatively. Denotative is what audiences hear and sees in the film. While the sound and images in the film are connotative and the way of shot is intended to evoke certain feelings from the audiences

### **One-Shot**

According to the Sklar (1993: 526) shot is a series of frames that runs for an uninterrupted period. The one-shot technique is a shooting technique that is done with only one take/shoot, without any pauses. One shot means when someone press the turns on to turns off in a shot or scene

### **Camera Angle**

According to Edgar et al (2010: 119) when a cinematographer will take a shot of an object, he can use three ways; high angle, low angle and eye level.

### **Type of Shot**

According to Edgar et al (2010: 123) the types of shot can be identified each shot by their distance and the ways in which they present settings and characters.

### **Camera Movement**

According to the Edgar-Hunt et al (2010: 133) camera movement is the movement of the camera, i.e., the camera is moving, while the object is in its position.

### **Lighting**

In cinematography, there are various lighting techniques. Lighting in a film plays a significant role so that a scene can be seen in the eyes of the audience clearly. In addition, lighting can also help describe the mood and atmosphere in a scene. In the film, various techniques are used depending on the situation you want to show.

### **Historical Approach**

History is the study of changes that have occurred over time and includes all aspects of human society. Political, social, economic, scientific, technological, medical, cultural, intellectual, religious and military developments are all part of history.

### **World War I**

World War I marked the first major international conflict of the twentieth century. According to Pendergast (2002: 42) the assassination of Prince Franz Ferdinand became first that sparked this war, which began in August 1914. This assassination was targeted to kill high official to gain independence of Bosnia and Herzegovina from Austro-Hungarian, but this assassination caused the Austrian Emperor angry and caused war on Serbia. This event became chain that led into World War I.

### **Operation Alberich**

*1917* was adapted from the story of Sam Mendes' grandfather, Alfred Mendes as a messenger during World War I. When World War I took place, information was important, so there was a special task to carry secret messages. Secret messengers conducted by selected soldiers. Based on the Sam Mendes grandfather's story, *1917* is a reminder for the audiences about the struggle of the soldiers in World War I and that reminds them of the cruelty of war. This inspiration makes the film even more suspenseful where inspiration comes from historical events.

## **Research Methodology**

In this chapter, the researcher wants to use qualitative method as the principal instrument. The researcher uses qualitative method to explore one-shot and historical approach found within the title of Sam Mendes' *1917* (2019). According to Creswell in his book *Research Design* (2009) qualitative methods are a means to explore and understand the meaning of individuals or groups that are ascribed to social or human problems. The researcher uses this design to understand more about the topic. Furthermore, the qualitative research has characteristics, they are, meaning become the important one in qualitative research, researcher must describe the data by their own language, the data of qualitative research can be collected from documents, observing, the final written of qualitative research has a flexible structure, and so on.

The object selected to be analyzed in this research is *1917* movie that first released in 2019 by DreamWorks Pictures, Reliance Entertainment, New Republic Pictures, Mogambo and Neal Street Productions. The director of this movie is Sam Mendes. The movie is in the form of original DVD with duration of 01:19:49. The researcher uses English subtitle and cinematography as the main data.

In the steps of collecting data from *1917* (2019) the researcher uses observation the method, they are, watching, reading, identifying, classifying, and selecting. In this thesis also contains of method of analyzing the data, they are, displaying, explaining, and interpreting.

## **Finding and Discussion**

On this occasion, the researcher tried to explore the signs in one-shot technique and representations of World War I in Operation Alberich in the *1917* film based on semiotic analysis. This research also helps the researcher to find out how the topic of one-shot and war events in World War I has been revealed in the movie directed by Sam Mendes.

## Cinematographical elements in One-Shot Technique present war life



**Picture 1**

(1917, 00:01:44 – 00:2:00)

In the picture above, this is the first scene in the film which is an introduction to a war-themed film because the characters in it are wearing army uniforms. Where in the picture above begins the journey of the characters in the film. In this first picture, there is no dialogues shown from both characters, it only shows the movement of the characters.

Camera angle in the picture above uses straight-on camera angle. It is a commonly used technique and used to show the movement of the character. As seen in the captured shot above, one character reaches out his hand to another character, asking him to join. The MCU shown in the picture above signifies the emotion of the character. Camera movement technique is using hand-held, this technique makes shaky effect in the scene that is often associated with a documentary-styled film. Lighting used in the picture above is imitating from sunlight which is done outside the room which is available lighting and supported by bounce lighting to remove shadows on the characters' faces, with the result that the face can be seen clearly.



**Picture 2**

(1917, 00:02:16 – 00:03:38)

Conversation between Tom Blake and Will Schofield about British Government was not giving soldiers proper food, in the picture above shows that Will Schofield saving leftover ham and bread, so Tom Blake ate and said it tasted like old shoes.

Camera angle in the picture above uses straight-on, used to show the movement of the character. As seen in the captured shot above, both characters is walking and having a conversation about food. The MLS is usually used to show characters from waist to head. In the picture above, the type of shot used is MLS because this type is usually used to highlight the characters that are in conversation. Camera movement in the picture taken above is using steadicam to follow characters that are walking leisurely while having conversation to produce a smooth effect without any shaking effect so that the audiences can focus on the dialogue delivered in the scene. Same as the first picture, the second picture also use available and bounce lighting with the result that the characters' faces seen clearly without shadow.



**Picture 3**

*(1917, 00:07:00 – 00:07:20)*

General Erinmore assigned Tom Blake and Will Schofield to go to the Second Devon to hand over a warrant not to pursue and attack Germany. The Second Devon has 1.600 members and one of them is Tom Blake's older brother. So, Tom Blake has the ambition to save his brother from the German attack.

Camera angle in the picture above uses straight-on, used to show the movement of the character. As seen in the captured shot above, the character is listening to the command, and not the General Erinmore that is highlighted but Tom Blake and Will Schofield, because in the picture above is intended to display the character's expression. The MLS is usually used to show characters from waist to head. In the picture above, the type of shot used is MLS because this type is used to highlight the characters that are in conversation. Camera movement in the picture taken above is using hand-held. Hand-held aims to create a shaky effect and turn the display into a documentary scene. Practical light is used in the picture above because it describes the atmosphere on the battlefield and is in a dark place so that the light used comes from candles in the room. Tom Blake and Will Schofield are the objects highlighted in the picture above to make the audience can focus on the object and can feel the character's facial expressions. Lighting is also used to support the character's facial expressions, which is used in the picture above is a practical light where the light source comes from a candle in a dark room. The candle also highlights the character's face so that the character's expression is clearly visible.



**Picture 4**

*(1917, 00:07:56 – 00:08:08)*

General Erinmore told Tom Blake and Will Schofield that they were alone on the arduous mission without the protection of the other soldiers. Camera angle in the picture above uses straight-on, used to show the movement of the character. In the picture shows that General Erinmore speak to Will Schofield while writing. The LS is used to show characters from long distance, usually used for action film or musical scene to make the audiences enjoy the action of the characters. From the picture above, the type shot that used is LS. LS in the picture above fit the situation to use to highlight the character who is talking or having a conversation. To support the LS, the camera movement in the picture above is used hand-held. This method is used because hand-held usually used for the documentary scene. Inside the room, the lighting called practical lighting is only focused on General Erinmore but it can also call key lighting, means that the highlighted character is powerful or stand out more than the other characters. He says that Blake and Schofield must walk alone than bring the group of soldiers and he conveys it using proverbs. General Erinmore gave an order that cannot be denied and must be completed quickly.





**Picture 5**

*(1917, 00:10:30 – 00:11:15)*

This part is the beginning of the journey of Tom Blake and Will Schofield to run the command. In this scene, there is no dialogues shown from the characters, it only shows the movement of the characters to show the audience the situation around the scene, so they do not focus on the character's conversation. There are two objects in the picture above that are highlighted. It uses low angle for Tom Blake and Will Schofield and the other side straight-on for the soldiers that are sitting along the trench. First, in the picture which is shown in a low angle, this technique is used to convey that the highlighted character is a powerful thing, so that the audiences will feel that they are in a weak situation. In this picture, it is intended for the audiences to feel like what is in the film, the audiences to be able to explore what happened to the soldiers who were sitting along the trench. Second, straight-on angle in the picture is for the soldiers that sit in along the trench, used to make the audience focus about the soldiers. LS is used for Tom Blake and Will Schofield movement. What is highlighted in this picture is the MCU which is used to view the soldiers around Tom Blake and Will Schofield. This type of shot supported by steadicam for the camera movement, the MCU in this scene is used to show the emotions of the cameo characters displayed. To be able to see the character's facial expressions, the lighting uses the general lighting of a scene, key lighting. Besides that, key lighting alone is not enough, thus producing a shadow on the character's face. By supporting key lighting, it also uses fill lighting to remove the shadow on the highlighted character's face.



**Picture 6**

*(1917, 00:17:07 – 00:18:20)*

In the pictures taken above, Tom Blake and Will Schofield begin to leave their trenches and head across the field to the German trenches. Camera angle in the pictures above use straight-on, used to show the movement of the characters. As seen in the captured shot above, Tom Blake and Will Schofield crawled and ducked to avoid the Germans in the trenches in front of them. In the field they saw corpses that were not only humans but also horses used for war. The type shot LS is used to show the surrounding area and not focus on the characters and used see the action of the character. Camera movement that used in the pictures taken above is steadicam. LS is supported by steadicam camera movement, used to create smooth movements when the camera is running, because in the picture above the character walk slowly and to allow the audiences to see the surroundings clearly. In the image above uses available lighting to imitate light from the sunlight.

### **War life reflected in the Sam Mendes' *1917* (2019)**

This film is based on the events of In World War I, Operation Alberich. Inspired by soldiers who deliver letters to cross the enemy zone to the zone of soldiers assigned to separate places. The film also depicts how Operation Alberich went and how the soldiers went through it. Sam Mendes directed the film which story is based on grandfather experiences in Operation Alberich.

In this film a lot of messages conveyed through signs by the director. At the beginning of the film in the *Picture 1*, the first sign in this scene is the uniform used by the soldiers in khaki green, indicating that the two soldiers are British soldiers and it used by British Army in World War I. It can be indicated from the first picture taken of the film, that the story in the film tells the main character to side with the British.

The next signs in the film talk about the British government's treatment of soldiers who fought in Operation Alberich during World War I. The first sign in the second picture is the ham and bread that Will Schofield brought, which is leftover food that he obtained in previous feedings to soldiers England. When they ate it, Tom Blake and Will Schofield did not finish it, but they kept it back. They think that they may not be given enough food in the future.

The second sign that proves British soldiers were not treated better reflected in *1917* can be found in *Pictures 5* and *Picture 9*. Where in *Picture 5*, it shows soldiers who look pathetic, hungry and cold during war break when they were not facing the enemies. This contrasts with the German soldiers in the first *Picture 15*. Even German soldiers can drink alcohol until they are drunk, while British soldiers for food supplies are not enough. Furthermore, in *Picture 9*, when Tom Blake and Will Schofield were exploring the trenches of the German army, they found the German army beds more comfortable. They even saw that the rat in the German trenches were bigger than those in the British army trenches.

In this film, the character's facial expressions are often shown to convey a message. As in the *Picture 3*, Tom Blake shows a sad face mixed with ambition to save his brother. Moreover, in the *Picture 7*, the look on Will Schofield's face can be seen conveying the pain of the wound when the palm of his hand caught the barbed wire and in the second picture, the wound touched the corpse which had a

wound on the back. From the expression on his face, one could infer how painful a war was. In *Picture 6* in the second picture, it can be seen a corpse hanging from barbed wire and in *Picture 7* in the second picture, a corpse with an injured back is seen. In the pictures, the director conveying that Will Schofield's injuries are nothing compared to a dead body hanging and his back injured by a gun. Will Schofield's face is a sign that it does not end there, in the 2nd picture of *Picture 10*, Will Schofield's face be seen feeling pain and being hit by a bomb explosion. Moreover, in *Picture 11*, it can be seen that Will Schofield's face is really frightened by what happened to him. This conveys a message to the audience how a soldier feels in war.

The next sign, how this film conveys that the army in World War I was used as a tool of war. The leaders only ruled in a safe position while the soldiers were used as their fighting tool. In *Picture 4*, the use of cinematography with highlighting the face of the General, as if he is very powerful and gives orders regardless of the lives of Tom Blake and Will Schofield. Will Schofield asks if only the two of them were assigned, the General replies that it's just the two of them with no protection from the other soldiers. Moreover, in *Picture 17*, it is also shown how a leader does not care about the words of his subordinates. Where Will Schofield ordered to cancel the attack because it was a German trap, but he was ignored.

When a soldier is dead, they are even like trash and thrown away or left. In some of the pictures above, in the second picture in *Picture 6* and *Picture 16*, it is conveyed that the corpse was just left and was not respected as it should be. Likewise with the main character in the film, Tom Blake, who when he died his corpse was left behind.

The army as a tool of war is not only seen from the leader figure in the *1917* film, but in several dialogues, the soldiers themselves complain about a war. They themselves also know that they are just a tool ready to attack at any time. In the conversation between Tom Blake and Will Schofield about medal below:

Will Schofield : *"I swapped it, with a French captain."*  
Tom Blake : *"Swapped it? For what?"*  
Will Schofield : *"Bottle of wine."*  
Tom Blake : *"Well, what did you do that for?"*  
Will Schofield : *"I was thirsty."*

.....  
Tom Blake : *"Men have died for that. If I got a medal, I'd take it back home. Why didn't you just take it home?"*  
Will Schofield : *"Look, it's just a bit of bloody tin. It doesn't make you special. Doesn't make any difference to anyone."*  
(1917, 36:20 – 37:03)

The above conversation proves that a medal does not make soldiers strong, it is just a useless object, the words of Will Schofield who exchanged his medal for thirst, proves that food is more important than a medal. Not only in the main character but in the cameo cast, there are also conversations that prove that the army is a tool of the rulers. Like the soldiers in the truck when Will Schofield hitched them:

British Soldier : *"All right. Here we go again, boys. Welcome aboard the night bus to fuck-knows-where."*  
(1917, 55:04 – 55:15)

From the quote in the dialogue above, once a soldier did not know where they were going. The sign of the statement indicated that the soldiers were simply following orders and were not told what their purpose was. They were only told who they were fighting and had no idea what the purpose was, other than killing each other. Furthermore, it can be found when Will Schofield manages to reach his goal of delivering the letter. Colonel MacKenzie who was addressed initially did not believe the orders given, but after reading the letter he believed. After that he gave a statement to Will Schofield:

MacKenzie : *"That's it for now, and then next week, command will send a different message. "Attack at dawn." There is only one way this war ends. Last man standing."*  
(1917, 01:40:20 – 01:40:42)

From the quotation above, Colonel MacKenzie conveyed his complaint as a colonel. Orders are always changing, and he and his troops must obey all orders until he thinks that a tool that lasts longer will win in the war.

Not only soldiers who became victims in the war reflected in the 1917 film. But there were settlements that were destroyed and even animals became victims of Operation Alberich in World War I. In *Picture 6*, there is a dead horse. The horse is an army mount used for war. In *Picture 14*, it looks like the destruction of a village, when Will Schofield hides and meets a woman, the place

is the commune of Ecooust in France. The village was abandoned by residents because the place was used as a war zone. At some of the points above, not only soldiers who are involved in war and become victims, residents and animals also feel the war. The message from the points above is how cruel World War I was for both soldiers and civilians and even animals to feel its effects.

This film also reflects on the cheating but smart German soldiers who managed to fool the British soldiers several times in this film and how the British soldiers were easily tricked. In *Picture 12*, when the pilot of a German plane crashed, and the pilot asked for help fetching water. When rescued, the pilot has bad intentions and kills Tom Blake. At this point, it indicates that the pilot was once loyal to his country and could still kill even though he knew he was helpless and was immediately shot by Will Schofield.

In further evidence, in the second of *Picture 15*, when the German soldier was caught by Will Schofield and told to be quiet when released, when he was released, the soldier shouted "*Englander*". This shows how cunning German soldiers in war and British soldiers were too kind to the enemy and easily deceived. And at the heart of the film how the British soldiers are easily tricked is the retreat of the German troops and leaving their trenches. This was done not without reason, but the retreat of the German troops was to lure the British troops to attack them, and they could fall into a trap. An example of a trap presented in the film is in the first *Picture 10*. In the picture taken above, Will Schofield found a tripwire to trap British soldiers.

## **Conclusion**

The first problem statement includes of the cinematographical elements that represent war life based on the camera angle, type of shot, camera movement and lighting. The meaning conveyed to the shooting object in a film is distinguished based on these four things. The second problem statement includes the war life, explained about the war life of soldiers and civilians in Operation Alberich in the era of World War I, there were found many signs that reflected the war life in this event.

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