

*Visual Semiotics of Javanese Cultural Signs in Indonesia's Popular Horror Film  
Titled "KKN Di Desa Penari"*

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**Abstract**

The rapid development of horror films in Indonesia provides a perspective on the increasing trend and global interest in the entertainment industry. Many Indonesian filmmakers have gained attention from audiences and achieved viral status in 2022. One such example is the horror film titled "KKN DI DESA PENARI," which is among the most popular horror films in Indonesia in the last five years and has been screened in the United States. There is still limited research in Indonesia that explores horror films from the perspective of visual semiotics, directly analyzing the visual signs within them, including those related to Javanese culture. This study employs a qualitative descriptive method, utilizing Roland Barthes' semiotic approach, focusing on examining visual signs associated with traditional Javanese culture in Indonesia. The research aims to provide an analysis of visual signs related to traditional Javanese culture found in the film "KKN DI DESA PENARI."

Keywords: Film, Semiotics, Javanese, Cultural Sign

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## Introduction

Horror films hold a special place in the history of Indonesian cinema. As one of the most popular genres, horror films have become a reflection of the nation's rich culture, beliefs, and local traditions. The roots of horror films in Indonesia can be traced back to the early era of national cinema in the 1930s. One of the first horror films, *Doenia dalam Bahaja* (1934), introduced mystical and supernatural elements that have since become defining features of the genre in the country.

In the 1970s and 1980s, horror films reached the peak of their popularity with the emergence of legendary works such as *Giving Birth in the Grave* (1972) and *Servant of Satan* (1980). These films blended terrifying stories with local myths such as pocong, kuntilanak, and genderuwo, which enhanced their appeal to Indonesian audiences. Additionally, filmmakers like Sisworo Gautama Putra and Tjut Djalil played pivotal roles in solidifying the genre's place in the national cinema landscape. Although the quality and popularity of Indonesian horror films declined during the 1990s, the genre experienced a resurgence in the 2000s, driven by young directors adopting more modern approaches. One notable figure is Joko Anwar, who directed the 2017 remake of *Servant of Satan* (*Pengabdian Setan*). The genre has continued to evolve, featuring more complex narratives, improved visual effects, and influences from global trends, all while preserving its local roots. Indonesia has experienced a surge of high-quality horror films in the last five years, with many horror works by Indonesian filmmakers gaining significant attention from local audiences. This is evidenced by a film titled *KKN Di Desa Penari*, directed by Awi Suryadi and produced by MD Pictures. The film was released on April 30, 2022, and achieved great success as the highest-grossing film in Indonesia with over 9 million viewers. This marks the second-largest achievement after *Avengers: Endgame*, which was screened in 2019 with more than 11 million viewers (Fikri, 2022). Film is a medium of moving images that not only serves as entertainment but also as a means of communication capable of conveying messages visually. In the context of visual communication studies, films can be interpreted and analyzed through various elements, such as composition, color, camera movement, lighting, and symbols that appear within the narrative. These elements work together to construct meanings that can influence the audience's perceptions and emotions (Prasetyo, 2021). Through a visual communication approach (Hafidz, Muchammad, 2017), film becomes an intriguing subject of study as it allows researchers to uncover how messages and symbols are effectively conveyed through the cinematic medium.

Through this long journey, horror films have become more than just a form of entertainment; they also serve as a reflection of collective fears and the cultural identity of Indonesian society. This genre continues to grow, producing works capable of competing on an international level while maintaining the distinctive essence of local traditions. Javanese culture, as one of the largest cultural heritages in Indonesia, holds a rich symbolic and visual wealth that reflects philosophical, social, and spiritual values. The diversity of visual expressions in Javanese culture can be found in various forms of art, ranging from architecture, batik, wayang, to performing arts, each carrying its own distinct meaning. These visualizations not only function as a means of communication but also as representations of the understanding of the world, the relationship between humans and God, as well as social interactions within the community (Dite, 2023).

This study focuses on the exploration of Javanese cultural visuals within the context of art and symbolism used in Javanese society. Based on Roland Barthes' semiotic theory, which

emphasizes the significance of sign and symbol interpretation, this research aims to uncover how visual elements in Javanese culture convey deeper meanings, both in terms of denotation, connotation, and the myths that develop. Using a semiotic visual approach, this study will explore how Javanese culture is depicted through various media, including film, which has become an increasingly popular medium for introducing culture to a wider audience. As time progresses, Javanese culture continues to adapt to social and technological changes, yet the core values in these visual traditions remain preserved. In this context, film becomes an effective medium for maintaining and spreading Javanese cultural symbols. Through the visuals displayed in films, audiences can experience and understand the meanings embedded in these symbols, which not only represent traditions but also raise awareness about the importance of preserving local culture. Therefore, this study is expected to provide new insights into the role of Javanese cultural visuals in strengthening the national cultural identity and the importance of cultural preservation through mediums relevant to contemporary developments (Agustin, 2022). It is important to highlight research that discusses cultural preservation (Ahmad et al., 2018).



Figure 1: “KKN Di Desa Penari” Film Poster  
[Source: imdb.com, 2022]

This is evident from a film titled *KKN di Desa Penari*, directed by Awi Suryadi and produced by MD Pictures. Released on April 30, 2022, the film achieved tremendous success as the highest-grossing Indonesian film, attracting over 9 million viewers. This achievement ranks second only to *Avengers: Endgame*, which was released in 2019 and garnered over 11 million viewers (Fikri, 2022). Indonesia has a strong tendency to be drawn to mystical or horror-themed stories. It can be said that this film went viral first through social media, with people everywhere talking about its story. This created a powerful sense of curiosity about the film *KKN di Desa Penari* (Arief & Imanuel, 2019). Since September 23, 2022, the film *KKN di Desa Penari* has even managed to be screened in cinemas across the United States (Kompas.com, 2022).

The visual element is an effective means of delivering messages to the audience (Mahatmi & Medyasepti, 2024). In the field of visual communication design, the application of design principles to visuals has a significant impact on achieving better and more effective design outcomes (Natasya et al., 2022). Composition is the placement of the point of interest within

a frame in moving images to provide an appropriate visual perspective (Prasetyo et al., 2022). Of course, determining the composition first requires identifying the main point in the film that will be highlighted hierarchically. Visuals can influence the development of the audience's perception (Akyuwen et al., 2024). Traditional culture has always played a vital role in shaping the character and identity of societies, including in Indonesia. As a nation with diverse ethnic groups, cultures, and traditions, Indonesia has long been a wellspring of inspiration for various art forms, including cinema. One notable example within the Indonesian film industry is *KKN di Desa Penari*, a horror film that delves into the richness of Javanese culture and weaves it with the mystical elements typical of the genre.

Released in 2022 and directed by Awi Suryadi, the film follows a group of students participating in a Community Service Program (KKN) in a remote Javanese village. During their stay, they experience a series of supernatural events involving spirits and rituals tied to traditional Javanese beliefs. Not only did *KKN di Desa Penari* achieve immense success, garnering over 9 million viewers in Indonesia, but it also sparked a renewed interest in horror films that incorporate local cultural values.

### Javanese Culture as the Central Theme

In *KKN di Desa Penari*, Javanese culture serves not merely as a backdrop but as a core element of the narrative. A key example of this is the film's focus on mystical beliefs that continue to permeate the everyday lives of the villagers. The belief in spirits like pocong, kuntilanak, genderuwo, and ritual dancers is deeply rooted in Javanese tradition. These elements transcend mere horror symbols, representing the ongoing tension between modernity and tradition in an increasingly advanced world.

The characters in the film engage in various traditional rituals such as offerings and taboos, showcasing how Javanese beliefs remain integral to the village's way of life. These rituals not only enhance the dramatic tension within the story but also offer an authentic portrayal of Javanese culture, where the worldview encompasses both physical and spiritual dimensions. The depiction of these rituals and the underlying mythology in the film helps connect the audience with cultural heritage that is rarely encountered in modern urban settings. As a result, *KKN di Desa Penari* functions not just as entertainment but as an educational tool, reminding viewers of the importance of preserving long-standing traditions.



Figure 2: Scene “KKN Di Desa Penari”  
[Source: layar.id, 2020]

After surveying respondents who watched the trailer before seeing the movie *KKN Di Desa Penari*, the majority of the audience stated that they found it more terrifying, shocking, and intriguing compared to other Indonesian horror films. This is attributed to the importance of the application of composition (Linando & Prasetyo, 2022), the effects of editing transitions and camera movement in the trailer. The author is interested in conducting an analysis of the film's trailer to understand how the interpretation of Javanese tradition symbols is applied in the film titled "KKN Di Desa Penari". The author develops the research based on a previous study titled "THE MYSTICAL VALUES AND MYTHS CONTAINED IN THE NOVEL *KKN DI DESA PENARI* BY SIMPLEMAN" (Maulinda, 2021), dan penelitian terdahulu yang sudah dilakukan penulis dengan judul "The Aesthetic Meaning of Visuals in the Trailer of *Suzzanna Malam Jumat Kliwon 2023 Production*". This research only discusses the visual meanings that emerge from Javanese cultural symbols, analyzed through semiotic interpretation.

## **Methods**

The research was conducted using a descriptive qualitative approach (Dr. Eko Murdiyanto, n.d.), This research was conducted using a qualitative approach with a descriptive nature, focusing on interpreting Javanese cultural symbols in the film (Ahmad Toni, 2017). This method was chosen because it allows researchers to analyze Javanese symbols and the meanings embedded in the research object in depth, enabling a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon being studied. The descriptive qualitative approach is also suitable for exploring and explaining various aspects of the research object, while semiotics is employed as a method of interpreting signs to understand how Javanese symbols appear in each scene of the film "*KKN DI DESA PENARI*."

## **Data Collection Methods**

The observation was conducted by repeatedly watching the film, holding focus group discussions with several lecturers from Film and Visual Communication Design programs to analyze visual signs using semiotic methods, and testing theories derived from film literature studies.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The theory used in this research applies Roland Barthes' semiotic approach, analyzing visual signs from Javanese cultural symbols present in the film. Roland Barthes' semiotic model provides a framework for analyzing cultural elements within popular culture and mass media. Barthes introduces two key concepts: denotation and connotation. Denotation represents the first level of meaning, focusing on the direct relationship between the signifier and the signified, which conveys the most literal interpretation of a sign. Connotation, in contrast, refers to the second level of meaning, encompassing subjective or intersubjective interpretations. Essentially, denotation explains what an object or sign represents, while connotation delves into how it is represented and the associated meanings it conveys (Shalekhah et al., 2021).

## Semiotics of Roland Barthes

Table 1: Barthes *Signification Process*

1. Signifier penanda	2. Signified petanda
3. Denotative Sign Tanda Denotatif	
4. Conotative signifier Penanda Konotatif	5. Conotative Signified Petanda Konotatif
6. Conotative Sign Tanda konotatif	

Roland Barthes, a prominent figure in semiotics, expanded on Ferdinand de Saussure's concepts of the *signifier* and *signified*. Barthes introduced additional layers of meaning through the concepts of denotation, connotation, and myth, which provide deeper insights in visual analysis (Yuwandi, 2018). Denotation represents the direct or literal meaning of a sign, connotation adds emotional and perceptual dimensions, and myth refers to meanings shaped by specific social and cultural contexts (Prasetyo et al., 2023). This study applies these concepts to analyze fan-made posters, uncovering multiple layers of meaning within the designs.

## Results and Discussion



Figure 3: Movie Scene, “KKN Di Desa Penari”  
[Source: “KKN Di Desa Penari”, 2022]

Denotation	Connotation
A beautiful atmosphere in a village in the morning with a backdrop of mountains. A stretch of rice fields and green trees. The village is located in the Gunung Kidul region, Central Java, Indonesia (2009).	Natural beauty, the traditional atmosphere of a Javanese village.
Myth	
The village atmosphere is a comfortable, serene, and cool place. It serves as a text rich in mythology and symbolism, offering deep insights into the lives of its people.	



Figure 4: Movie Scene, “KKN Di Desa Penari”  
 [Source: “KKN Di Desa Penari”, 2022]

Denotation	Connotation
<p>This gate symbolizes access and openness. It serves not only as a physical barrier but also as a symbol of acceptance for visitors, such as students coming for a community services program. The gate also indicates hopes for positive change and collaboration between the students and the villagers. In this context, the gate invites observers to understand that the students' arrival is not merely an academic activity, but also an opportunity for cultural and knowledge exchange.</p>	<p>In this context, the gate carries strong connotations of transition and connection. While it serves as a physical boundary, it also symbolizes a threshold between two worlds: the academic life of the students and the daily life of the villagers. The act of opening the gate signifies a welcoming gesture, representing not just access but the potential for mutual understanding and cooperation. It implies that the students' arrival is an invitation to bridge cultural gaps, fostering a sense of community, exchange, and growth. The gate, therefore, becomes a metaphor for opportunity, emphasizing the possibility of positive change and collaboration through shared experiences. The connotation here is that the gate is not merely an entry point but a symbol of new beginnings and collective effort.</p>
Myth	
<p>In village culture, the gate is often regarded as a transition point from one world to another. In this context, the students passing through the gate enter a different realm—the world of a community that possesses rich traditions, values, and stories. The gate functions as a symbol of the transformative journey, where students not only give but also receive valuable life experiences from the local community.</p>	



Figure 5: Movie Scene, “KKN Di Desa Penari”  
 [Source: “KKN Di Desa Penari”, 2022]

Denotation	Connotation
<p><b>Sesajen</b> is an offering consisting of various foods, flowers, and sacred objects arranged neatly on a mat. In this context, the visual representation of sesajen depicts physical objects such as rice, cakes, fruits, and leaves arranged aesthetically. It is a concrete representation of the rituals performed in Javanese culture, aimed at honoring the spirits of ancestors and deities.</p>	<p><b>Sesajen</b> carries deeper and symbolic meanings. The food in sesajen not only serves as a physical offering but also symbolizes gratitude, respect, and hopes for blessings. The colors, shapes, and types of food can have specific meanings; for example, the color yellow often represents prosperity, while flowers symbolize beauty and life. In this regard, the visual representation of sesajen can be seen as a reflection of profound cultural values, such as respect for ancestors and harmony between humans and nature.</p>
<h3>Myth</h3>	
<p><b>Sesajen</b> can be viewed as a symbol of the relationship between humans and the spiritual world. By presenting sesajen, the Javanese people believe they establish communication with the supernatural realm and receive protection and blessings from their ancestors.</p>	





Figure 6: Movie Scene, “KKN Di Desa Penari”  
 [Source: “KKN Di Desa Penari”, 2022]

Denotation	Connotation
<p>The visual of a Javanese grave draped in black cloth represents a physical object in the form of a tomb covered by black fabric.</p>	<p>A grave draped in black cloth carries deeper meanings, such as sorrow, respect, and loss. The black cloth itself is often associated with sadness and death, symbolizing the mourning process experienced by the family and community left behind.</p>
Myth	
<p>A Javanese grave draped in black cloth can be viewed as a symbol of the relationship between life and death. The Javanese people believe that the spirits of their ancestors remain present and play a role in their daily lives. The black cloth covering the grave is not only a sign of remembrance but also a connection between the physical and spiritual worlds. This practice creates a myth about the continuity of life after death, where the deceased still hold a place in the memories and rituals performed by their families. In this context, the grave serves as a bridge connecting the visible world with the invisible world, as well as a reminder of the cycle of life.</p>	



Figure 7: Movie Scene, “KKN Di Desa Penari”  
 [Source: “KKN Di Desa Penari”, 2022]

Denotation	Connotation
<p>The Javanese buffet feast is a communal dining event held during important occasions, such as weddings, circumcisions, or other traditional celebrations. In this context, the buffet visual includes a variety of foods served in a buffet style, such as rice, side dishes, vegetables, and desserts. The abundant arrangement of food reflects the richness of Javanese cuisine and serves as a symbol of the tradition of sharing within the community.</p>	<p>The buffet feast carries deeper meanings, such as a sense of togetherness, hospitality, and mutual respect among community members. The food served not only fulfills physical needs but also serves as a medium to strengthen social and cultural relationships. This activity symbolizes gratitude for the blessings received and expresses love and support for the individuals or families being celebrated. In this regard, the buffet becomes a symbol of the spirit of cooperation and closeness within Javanese society.</p>
Myth	
<p>The Javanese buffet feast creates a narrative about cultural identity and the continuity of tradition. This myth illustrates that food is not merely for consumption but also holds ritual significance that binds the community together. The act of dining together symbolizes a harmonious social life, where each individual contributes to creating a warm and loving atmosphere. In this way, the buffet feast not only celebrates specific moments but also passes cultural values to future generations, demonstrating that tradition lives on and is preserved through togetherness.</p>	



Figure 8: Movie Scene, “KKN Di Desa Penari”  
 [Source: “KKN Di Desa Penari”, 2022]

Denotation	Connotation
<p>Dancing in a crowded gathering within Javanese tradition refers to the physical activity where a group of people moves together in sync with a specific rhythm of music or song.</p>	<p>Dancing in a crowded gathering carries deeper meanings, such as a sense of togetherness, cultural identity, and collective expression. The act of dancing is not merely a physical movement but also a symbol of unity and harmony within the community. Through dance, individuals express their feelings, hopes, and cultural values. In this context, dancing becomes a way to strengthen social bonds, celebrate traditions, and preserve cultural heritage. A crowd dancing together creates an atmosphere of solidarity, where each individual feels like part of something larger.</p>
Myth	
<p>Dancing in a crowded gathering creates a narrative about the eternity of culture and the relationship between individuals and the community. This myth emphasizes that dance is a universal language that connects generations, creating continuity in cultural heritage. Dancing together also fosters a spiritual feeling and a deeper connection with ancestors and existing traditions. In this way, the act of dancing is not only viewed as entertainment but also as a ritual that reinforces cultural identity and the continuity of tradition.</p>	



Figure 9: Movie Scene, “KKN Di Desa Penari”  
 [Source: “KKN Di Desa Penari”, 2022]

Denotation	Connotation
<p>A set of Javanese gamelan instruments consists of various instruments, such as gongs, kenong, ketipung, and saron, arranged in one ensemble.</p>	<p>A set of gamelan instruments carries deeper meanings, such as cultural identity, harmony, and community unity. Gamelan music is not merely entertainment; it also reflects the values highly esteemed in Javanese society, such as cooperation and togetherness.</p>
Myth	
<p>A set of Javanese gamelan instruments creates a narrative about the eternity of tradition and the continuity of culture. This myth illustrates that gamelan is not merely a musical instrument but also a symbol of the collective identity of the Javanese community. Each instrument in the gamelan ensemble has a specific role and meaning, creating a harmony that represents balance in life. Additionally, gamelan performances are often associated with ceremonies and rituals that connect generations, preserve cultural heritage, and strengthen the sense of identity. In this way, gamelan becomes a medium that reinforces social bonds and conveys cultural messages to future generations.</p>	



Figure 10: Movie Scene, “KKN Di Desa Penari”  
 [Source: “KKN Di Desa Penari”, 2022]

Denotation	Connotation
<p>The Javanese funeral platform, or "kurung batang," is a structure made of wood or bamboo used to transport the deceased. This platform typically has a rectangular shape with a removable cover and is often adorned with traditional ornaments. The kurung batang serves as the final means of transport for the deceased before burial.</p>	<p>The Javanese funeral platform carries deeper meanings, such as respect, transition, and spirituality. The funeral platform not only serves as a means to transport the deceased but also symbolizes the final journey of an individual. The decorations and ornaments on the platform reflect the respect and love from family and the community for the deceased. In this context, the kurung batang also indicates the mourning process and sorrow, serving as a medium for the family to express their feelings of loss.</p>
Myth	
<p>The Javanese funeral platform creates a narrative about life after death and the relationship between the physical and spiritual worlds. This myth illustrates that the platform is not merely a tool for carrying the deceased, but also a symbol of the journey toward the afterlife. In Javanese tradition, there is a belief that the spirits of the deceased continue to exist and play a role in the lives they left behind. Therefore, the kurung batang serves as a bridge between the visible and the invisible worlds, fostering awareness of the cycle of life and death. In this way, the funeral platform acts as a reminder of the importance of honoring and remembering ancestors, as well as maintaining a connection with those who have passed away.</p>	

## Conclusions

The visual signs that appear in the film *KKN Di Desa Penari* showcase the strong cultural traditions of Central Java, manifesting not only as props in a film but also enriching the narrative and storyline. This horror film conveys messages and evokes sadness through various Javanese cultural visuals, such as the black cloth symbolizing mourning and the kurung batang serving as a place to lay the deceased. However, there are also messages of

gratitude and communal welcome that reflect the noble values of Javanese culture. These are represented in visuals like the entrance gate (gapura) to the village, the buffet feast, symbols of cooperation and togetherness, and the gamelan musical instruments. These are the noble values of Javanese cultural traditions.

Roland Barthes' semiotics analyzes symbols and signs visually, linking them to deeper meanings through denotation, connotation, and myths that occur in areas with strong customs and traditions. Javanese culture is one of the ancestral cultures of the Indonesian nation, often depicted in films that are sacred and full of messages, leaving a lasting impression on viewers. This is utilized as a form of preservation of Indonesian cultural heritage.

This research can certainly be further developed and continued, particularly in terms of discussing the technical aspects of visuals in films, as well as the narrative structure that can be expanded. It is hoped that future studies will further explore the semiotics of symbols and signs appearing in the film *KKN Di Desa Penari*. The same method could also be applied to conduct similar research with different film genres as the object. Visually, the signs that become symbols serve as a language of communication to the audience, creating an impression of reality in the film. Horror films, in particular, are capable of creating a sense of terror, surprise, and mysticism through the visual properties presented, enhancing the atmosphere of the film and making it more chilling.

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