

The Rational and Irrational Dialectics in the Simulacrum of Posters and Narratives in Indonesian Horror Film Genre

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ABSTRACT

In recent years—and even dating back to the 1970s and 1980s—the Indonesian horror film genre has consistently drawn large audiences to theaters. Conceptually, this study examines this phenomenon by employing Max Horkheimer’s theory of rational and irrational dialectics, Jean Baudrillard’s concept of simulacrum, and Textual Analysis applied to horror film posters and narratives from the 1970s to the 2000s, alongside select Asian horror films that resonate with audiences. The rational and irrational dialectic emerges prominently in Indonesian horror films, as viewers grapple with the interplay between reality and the supernatural depicted in posters and narratives that serve as simulacra, ultimately becoming modern myths. Philosophically, this dialectic presents a dilemma where humans navigate rationality and irrationality in attempting to dismiss mythological elements. Simulacrum, in this context, represents a duplication without an original, blurring the line between the copy and the real. Textual Analysis, rooted in media and cultural studies, is employed here as a methodology for examining texts that contain meaningful signs. Most Indonesian horror film posters and narratives feature terrifying creatures without real-world references. As a result, despite a dip in popularity during the 1990s, horror films from the 1970s through the 2000s have frequently achieved high viewership, especially those based on legendary tales familiar to audiences. These recurring themes, perpetuated through film posters and narratives, are further reinforced by makeup, animation techniques, and CGI (Computer Generated Imagery), all of which bring the horror elements to life.

Keywords: Rational and Irrational Dialectics; Myth, Simulacrum; Horror Film Posters; Narrative

INTRODUCTION

In the 2000s, Indonesian and Asian films (Japan, Korea, Thailand) gained significant traction across various platforms, including cinemas (Cinema XXI, CGV, and Cinepolis), DVD players, YouTube, and Netflix, particularly within the horror genre, which saw massive production and widespread circulation. These films span across various classifications and are categorized into major and sub-genres. Popular genres include drama, romance, religious drama, family drama, comedy, horror, horror-comedy, action, superhero, science fiction, and more, each reflecting the general tastes of Indonesian audiences.

In terms of quantity, horror films, both from Indonesian and Asian (Japanese, Korean, Thai) filmmakers, dominate the box office. One remarkable example is the Indonesian horror film *KKN di Desa Penari* (2022), which garnered over 10 million viewers according to *filmindonesia.or.id*. Similarly, the Korean film *Exhuma* (2024) reached 2 million viewers within a month of its release in Indonesian theaters, as reported by *idntimes.com*. These statistics highlight the substantial appeal and viewership of horror films in Indonesia. Below is a graphical representation of viewer numbers for the highest-grossing Indonesian horror films screened in theaters from 2022 to 2024.

Looking back, in 2002, the Japanese horror film *Ju-On* achieved international success, prompting a Hollywood remake titled *The Grudge*. Similarly, the Hong Kong horror film *The Eye*, a 2002 success, was remade by Hollywood in 2008. Thailand's *Shutter* (2004), often listed among the scariest horror films, was also remade by Hollywood in 2008. Horror films from Japan, Korea, Hong Kong, and Thailand have consistently captivated audiences from the late 1990s up to 2024, largely due to their unique and terrifying themes, with notable titles like *Ringu* (1998, Japan), *Ju-On* (2002, Japan), *Shutter* (2004, Thailand), *Train to Busan* (2016, Korea), *Exhuma* (2024, Korea), and *Haunted Universities Trilogy* (2024, Thailand).

Indonesian horror films, covering both horror and horror-comedy genres, have also maintained popularity. In the horror-comedy subgenre, reviewers often categorize these films as "horror-comedy" due to their blending of horror and comedic elements, often featuring well-known comedians or actors from the stand-up comedy scene. Notably, *Agak Laen* (2024) managed to attract 9,125,188 viewers, a record-breaking figure, according to *filmindonesia.or.id*.

Given this context, the author aims to examine Indonesian horror film posters and narratives, focusing on films that incorporate mythological, mystical, superstitious, legendary, or black magic themes rooted in Indonesia's cultural heritage. The study will focus on films from the 1970s, 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, with each decade represented by a horror film deemed iconic for its box office success and unique portrayal of Indonesian myths and legends. This analysis includes hand-painted

posters from the 1970s and 1980s and printed posters from cinema networks such as XXI, CGV, and Cinepolis in the 1990s and 2000s.

In this framework, cinema posters serve as an initial attraction, enticing potential viewers to attend screenings. Furthermore, film synopses and reviews published across media platforms also drive audience interest, leading to high box office performance. According to Zoebazary (2010), "box office" refers to the total revenue generated from ticket sales. The term "phenomenal" is defined by *dictionary.com* as "highly extraordinary or prodigious," or "of or relating to phenomena," implying that, in the context of horror films, "phenomenal" denotes impressive achievements in viewership and financial gain.

In line with the research objectives, this study utilizes Jean Baudrillard's concept of simulacrum, Max Horkheimer's *Dialectics of Rationality and Irrationality*, and Textual Analysis. While simulacrum and dialectical theories are not content analysis methods, they provide a philosophical perspective on human experiences encompassing intellect, culture, tradition, science, technology, and the environment. As Sindhunata (1983) notes in his preface to *Dilema Usaha Manusia Rasional*, Max Horkheimer's philosophical insights offer foundational answers to human inquiries about self and surroundings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Myths and Legends in Horror Film Posters and Narratives

Myths are commonly understood as representations of reality and nature that evolve within specific cultural frameworks. Myths often originate at the center of societal power structures and disseminate over time, becoming established ideologies. People trust in the truths presented by myths, though some consider them mere superstitions. Etymologically, "myth" derives from the Greek *mythos*, meaning "tale" (Kuntowijoyo, 1999). Before humanity developed scientific history, myths provided answers to existential questions, aligning with the German phrase *wie es eigentlich gewesen*—explaining how things truly came to be (Kartodirdjo, 1982). Historically, myths precede history as a way of narrating the past.

Humanity universally coexists with myths. According to Max Horkheimer in *The Dilemma of Rational Human Endeavor* (Sindhunata, 1984), the irrational aspects of myths paradoxically stem from rational human efforts, while rational pursuits often manifest as myths. Consequently, rational attempts to dismiss myth inevitably give rise to more mythological thinking. Horkheimer posits that human rationality itself embodies myth, and thus rational endeavors are mythological in nature, as they cannot stand independently but exist only within and through myth.

In his work *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes (2009) conceptualizes myth as a form of language that always has a historical basis, ancient or contemporary. Myth, he argues, cannot arise from the essence of something but from the discourse history

has chosen for it; it serves as a message that transcends spoken language. This message can be conveyed through various mediums—writing, photography, cinema, sports, performances, or publications—all of which can support mythic discourse.

Claude Levi-Strauss also links myth with language, stating that myths are conveyed through language and contain messages revealed through their narratives (Ahimsa-putra, 2012). Levi-Strauss further asserts that myths exist in two temporal dimensions: reversible and irreversible time. This is evident in the timeless phrasing often used in myths, such as “Once upon a time” or “In a distant past.” These opening phrases ground myths in the past, imparting a sense of historical continuity. The *Merriam-Webster* dictionary defines “legend” as “a story coming down from the past, especially one popularly regarded as historical, though not verifiable.” According to *Britannica.com*, a legend is a traditional story or collection of stories centered on a particular person or place, once typically relating to saints. Legends, like folktales, may feature supernatural beings or mythological elements and provide explanations of natural phenomena. Unlike myths, legends are more closely associated with a specific locality or person and are often recounted as historical fact.

In horror films, binary opposition commonly emerges within narratives through protagonists and antagonists, creating conflicts that drive the story. As Levi-Strauss explains, binary opposition involves a system of two related categories that, in their purest form, establish universal themes (Fiske, 2004). In horror films, the opposition between good (heroic) and evil (villainous) characters is a key attraction, embodying the universal struggle between opposing forces. As Danesi (2010) notes, characters in narratives represent archetypes—heroes, cowards, lovers, and friends—each symbolizing a distinct personality type. According to Danesi, the essence of a narrative comprises plot, characters, and setting. Plot denotes what the story conveys, while setting identifies the location and time.

Narratives appear in various media, including horror films, which convey their stories through both spoken and written texts. Roland Barthes (2010) notes that the world is filled with an infinite array of narratives across genres and forms—spoken or written language, images, body language, or a harmonious blend of these elements. These narratives span myths, legends, folktales, epics, dramas, films, and news reports. Horror films, especially, harness these narrative techniques to breathe life into legends, enabling these stories to thrive across different regions.

Posters, as a form of non-periodical mass media, hold a unique ability to communicate messages visually and strategically. According to Hoeta Soehoet (2003), posters are categorized as non-periodic mass media because they deliver messages irregularly. They often occupy strategic locations, such as near cinemas, to capture public attention. Film posters, specifically, play a crucial role in promoting films and can draw an audience through visual appeal. As Kristanto (cited in Hindarti, 2017) notes, film posters combine art and design elements that

reflect trends in technology and lifestyle, creating a timeless appeal that adapts to modern aesthetics.

Traditionally, film was produced on celluloid film strips, a light-sensitive plastic tape. However, as technology evolved, digital media replaced celluloid, though the term “film” remained in common use. Zoebazary (2010) explains that the term “genre” originates from the French word meaning “form” or “type” and, in the film industry, classifies films based on shared characteristics, settings, themes, and narrative structures. These classifications lead to popular genres such as action, horror, and science fiction. Horror, according to Pratista (2008), aims to evoke fear, shock, and deep terror in audiences, usually featuring antagonists in terrifying forms that threaten human protagonists.

Rational and Irrational Dialectics

Horkheimer argues that humanity’s rational pursuit of knowledge is inherently tied to irrational myths. Rational human efforts to comprehend the universe paradoxically give rise to irrational myths, as rationality cannot exist independently but must rely on myth. This dialectic demonstrates that rational and irrational concepts are inseparably intertwined in human thought.

Simulacrum

Piliang (2012) defines simulacrum as a duplication of a duplication, devoid of an original source, thus blurring the line between copy and authenticity. Baudrillard distinguishes three historical phases of appearance: Counterfeit, dominant during the classical era; Production, prevalent in the industrial era; and Simulation, which reigns in the current coded age. Simulation no longer seeks to replicate existing reality but creates hyperreality, an image without reference—pure simulacrum. Fantasy replaces reality in simulacrum, as simulations can make the unreal appear real, further complicating the distinction between fantasy and reality. Paul Virilio suggests that technological advancements in media allow people to inhabit two worlds simultaneously—the real and the imaginary. Techniques used in modern media make the supernatural and fantastical visible, enabling audiences to experience both realms through visual tricks.

CGI Technology

Technological advancements, especially Computer-Generated Imagery (CGI), have revolutionized the film industry, particularly in genres like horror and science fiction. CGI enables filmmakers to create realistic visual content for movies that would otherwise be difficult to depict. Cameron Hashemi-Pour explains CGI as the creation of still or animated visual content using imaging software, allowing its application in film effects, virtual reality, and various multimedia productions. In conclusion, myths and legends persist as essential elements of horror films, conveyed through posters and narratives. The integration of CGI and simulacrum

further enhances these mythical representations, allowing audiences to engage with both the real and imaginary in new, profound ways.

Previous Related Studies

Previous studies on horror film posters and content, using both quantitative and qualitative methods, are common. However, research focusing on horror film posters through the lens of rational and irrational dialectics, simulacrum, and textual analysis remains rare. To provide context, several studies related to horror films screened in Indonesian cinemas are highlighted below.

Yohana Debby, Theresia Intan Putri Hartiana, and Nanang Krisdinanto's study, *Desakralisasi Film Horor Indonesia* (2020), published in *Jurnal ProTVF*, explores how Indonesian horror films have desacralized religious elements in the post-New Order era. Using films like *Asih* (2018) and *Pengabdi Setan* (2017), this study reveals diverse audience responses to religious desacralization, with many viewers adopting an oppositional stance towards the portrayal of ritualistic elements in these films.

In *Antara Struktur dan Bahasa Visual Rekreasi Ketakutan* (2023), Tri Widyastuti Setyaningsih discusses horror film viewership during the COVID-19 pandemic as a form of "recreational fear." Published in *Imaji*, this research argues that horror films provide an emotional outlet, allowing audiences to experience fear in a controlled, entertaining environment, highlighting the commodification of fear in modern cinema.

Ahmad Salman Farid's *Representasi Mitos dalam Film Horor pada Waktu Maghrib* (2023) examines myth representation within horror films. Published in *Jurnal Studi Ilmu Komunikasi*, this study uses *Waktu Maghrib* as a case, showing how mythic symbols and elements like lighting and music amplify tension, appealing to cultural and religious sensitivities associated with Maghrib time, ultimately creating a dark, eerie atmosphere.

Isma Rahmadani et al., in their 2022 study, *Analisis Semiotika Poster Film Horor KKN di Desa Penari*, analyze semiotic elements within the *KKN di Desa Penari* poster. Published in *Jurnal Professional*, the study reveals how cultural symbols and traditional elements in the poster's design invoke a distinct Indonesian feel, portraying horror through cultural imagery rather than conventional fear-based visuals.

These studies provide a foundation for understanding the complex interplay of culture, myth, and religion in Indonesian horror films. Using concepts from Max Horkheimer and Jean Baudrillard, this research aims to explore how Indonesian horror film posters and narratives engage audiences through simulacra and myth, enhancing the genre's appeal by blurring lines between reality and supernatural belief.

METHOD

Design and Sample

This study employs a descriptive qualitative research design. According to Creswell (2014), qualitative methods rely on textual and visual data, follow unique steps in data analysis, and involve diverse design elements. Qualitative research is inherently descriptive, focusing on interpretive analysis that cannot be readily quantified (Sekaran & Bougie, 2010). This study utilizes *Textual Analysis*, a methodology rooted in Stuart Hall's *Cultural Studies* tradition, which considers text in various forms, including images, films, videos, graphics, and lyrics, as sources of meaning (McKee, 2001). The sample includes horror films from different decades (1970s, 1980s, 1990s, 2000s), supplemented by online and print articles related to these films. The researcher combines Textual Analysis with theories of rational and irrational dialectics by Max Horkheimer and Jean Baudrillard's concept of simulacrum.

Instrument and Procedure

The study collects data through primary and secondary sources. Primary data consists of selected horror film posters and narratives, while secondary data is gathered from related online articles, YouTube channels, and cinema screenings. The procedure includes selecting posters and film narratives that display elements of myth and legend, particularly those featuring supernatural or mythical creatures. The researcher systematically organizes and examines these chosen posters and narratives to reveal cultural representations of myths and legends.

Data Analysis

The data analysis involves several key steps:

- Reviewing and categorizing horror film posters and narratives that contain mythological or legendary elements, focusing on the portrayal of eerie or supernatural creatures.
- Selecting and displaying relevant posters and narratives for further analysis.
- Conducting a categorical analysis of the selected horror posters and narratives to describe and interpret them within specific thematic categories.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The findings in this research indicate a notable trend in the Indonesian horror film genre, wherein mythical elements and folklore are central themes that appeal to large audiences. By analyzing posters and narratives from Indonesian horror films across several decades, specific mythical figures such as Kuntilanak, Gendruwo, and the South Sea Queen emerge as recurring entities. These figures are deeply embedded in Indonesian cultural mythology and have been adapted into horror film

narratives to evoke both fear and intrigue, contributing to the genre's commercial success.

The study highlights how these horror films leverage CGI and animation to bring these mythical creatures to life, creating a visual simulacrum that blurs the line between fantasy and reality. For instance, films like *KKN Di Desa Penari* (2022), which garnered over 10 million viewers, use such visual effects to depict folklore-inspired characters in a way that resonates with local audiences. Similarly, *Nyi Blorong* (1982) incorporates the legend of the South Sea Queen's daughter to draw viewers, reflecting a broader pattern where supernatural elements in Indonesian horror films are adapted to engage audiences familiar with these myths.

The influence of myths in Indonesian horror films is further supported by the significant viewership in regions like Jakarta, West Java, and East Java, as recorded through cinema networks like Cinema XXI, CGV, and Cinapolis. This popularity can be attributed to the unique cultural resonance of these stories, which blend local myths with modern storytelling techniques. American horror films, in contrast, often employ themes of psychological horror or animal predators rather than mythical entities, as seen in movies like *Jaws* and *The Silence of the Lambs*.

A table summarizing the audience data for selected films shows a clear correlation between films featuring traditional myths and higher audience numbers. For example:

Film Title	Release Year	Mythological Element	Audience Views
Beranak Dalam Kubur	1971	Spirit of a dead mother	849,000 views
Nyi Blorong	1982	South Sea Queen's daughter	354,790 views
KKN Di Desa Penari	2022	Village spirit	10,061,033 views
Sewu Dino	2024	1000-day curse	4,886,406 views
Sumala	2024	Demon child	1,000,000 views

The analysis shows that Indonesian horror films using cultural myths do more than just entertain; they offer a unique psychological engagement that caters to the local population's belief systems. The presence of entities like the "South Sea Queen" or the "thousand-day curse" evokes a collective memory that resonates with Indonesian audiences, fostering a sense of familiarity within the supernatural. Moreover, the study points out that these myth-based films maintain a steady popularity across decades, suggesting a stable audience interest in culturally rooted horror narratives. For example, the 1971 film *Beranak Dalam Kubur* inspired multiple remakes, showing a sustained cultural and commercial interest.

In the realm of simulacrum, these films create visual representations of mythical entities that only exist in collective belief, not in reality. Through CGI and animation, the boundary between myth and the viewer's world is softened, immersing the audience in an "as-if-real" experience. This aligns with Baudrillard's concept of simulacra, where reproductions of myths become perceived as real. The findings affirm that Indonesian horror films leverage deeply ingrained cultural myths, enhancing audience engagement through simulacrum and the adept use of modern cinematic techniques. This strategy not only secures high viewership but also perpetuates local legends, maintaining their place in contemporary media while adapting them to meet the evolving tastes of the Indonesian film audience.

The findings in this research reveal a unique cultural phenomenon within Indonesian horror cinema, where the genre's success is deeply intertwined with the integration of local myths and folklore. This reliance on traditional mythical figures, such as *Kuntilanak*, *Gendruwo*, and *Nyi Roro Kidul*, reflects a profound connection between horror narratives and cultural identity. These figures are more than mere characters; they embody deeply held beliefs and collective fears that resonate with Indonesian audiences on a personal and cultural level. The enduring popularity of these themes across multiple decades highlights the genre's ability to evolve while maintaining a stable core rooted in local mythology.

One critical aspect of this discussion is the role of simulacrum in these films. Baudrillard's theory suggests that in a media-saturated society, representations can become detached from reality, creating a "hyperreality" where the line between real and imagined blurs. In the context of Indonesian horror, CGI and animation allow mythical beings, which exist solely within cultural belief, to be rendered "real" on screen. This approach gives audiences a sensory experience of myths, creating an immersive and hyperreal encounter with folklore. By doing so, filmmakers offer a simulated reality that allows viewers to confront their cultural fears and beliefs as if they were tangible, enhancing both the psychological impact and the entertainment value of these films.

The data on viewership across different decades reinforces the notion that these horror films do more than entertain; they serve as a medium for cultural preservation and reinterpretation. Films like *Beranak Dalam Kubur* (1971), which has been remade multiple times, demonstrate that certain narratives retain relevance by adapting their mythological themes for contemporary audiences. Each remake provides a fresh yet familiar encounter with myth, catering to both nostalgic viewers and younger generations who may be encountering these stories for the first time. This cyclical adaptation supports the idea that horror films act as cultural artifacts, perpetuating myths that have been historically significant.

Furthermore, the data indicates that horror films featuring supernatural and mythical entities significantly outperform other types of horror in Indonesia. For instance, *KKN Di Desa Penari* (2022) and *Sewu Dino* (2024) attracted millions of viewers, showing that narratives rooted in mysticism and local beliefs resonate

more strongly with Indonesian audiences than horror based purely on psychological fear or human antagonists, as is common in Western horror. This popularity may stem from the unique emotional response these films elicit; by representing culturally specific supernatural elements, they foster a sense of shared cultural experience and collective memory, creating an almost communal viewing experience that connects audiences on a deeper level.

From a psychological perspective, the frequent use of jump scares and supernatural elements taps into the audience's instinctual fear response, releasing dopamine and endorphins, as noted by Greco (2020). This biochemical reaction enhances the viewing experience, making horror films an effective medium for both fear and pleasure. The integration of familiar cultural symbols and myths amplifies this response, as audiences are not only reacting to the scares but also engaging with known cultural symbols that hold intrinsic meaning.

The findings also highlight an interesting contrast between Indonesian and Western horror narratives. While Western horror often uses human brutality or animal predators to induce fear, Indonesian horror relies on supernatural and mythical themes, reflecting different cultural fears and values. This contrast underscores the role of cultural context in shaping horror narratives, where Indonesian filmmakers prioritize themes that resonate with local beliefs in supernatural forces and the mystical aspects of existence. In doing so, they create a form of horror that is not only unique but also culturally significant, reinforcing local identity while appealing to a universal human fascination with the unknown.

In conclusion, the discussion of these findings emphasizes that Indonesian horror cinema achieves its impact through a blend of cultural myth, technological innovation, and psychological engagement. By bringing traditional myths to life through simulacrum, filmmakers provide audiences with a culturally resonant horror experience that transcends mere entertainment. This approach not only sustains high viewership but also preserves and revitalizes traditional beliefs, affirming horror's role as a meaningful cultural and cinematic expression. As long as these cultural myths and beliefs remain part of Indonesian society, horror films that depict them will likely continue to thrive, highlighting the genre's ongoing potential as a powerful conduit for cultural storytelling.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of Indonesian horror films reveals that myth and mysticism are central elements that drive the genre's appeal and cultural significance. Through the portrayal of mythical figures like *Kuntilanak*, *Gendruwo*, and *Nyi Roro Kidul*, Indonesian horror films tap into deep-seated cultural beliefs and traditional fears, creating a cinematic experience that resonates strongly with local audiences. These myths offer a way for audiences to explore existential questions about the supernatural, bridging the logical and the irrational. The use of CGI and animation has transformed these mythical figures into hyperreal entities that blur the line

between reality and fantasy, enhancing the psychological impact of horror films. This technological capability allows the horror genre to continually evolve while maintaining a foundation in culturally relevant storytelling. By creating a visual simulation of myths that do not exist in reality, horror films foster a dual experience where audiences engage both with fantasy and familiar cultural symbols. Moreover, the study shows that horror films with mythological elements have maintained consistent popularity across decades, underscoring the lasting appeal of stories rooted in cultural heritage. As these myths are reimagined for modern cinema, they not only entertain but also preserve traditional narratives, making them accessible to new generations. In conclusion, Indonesian horror films serve as a unique cultural phenomenon where technology, mythology, and human psychology intersect. By leveraging CGI to present culturally significant myths, these films satisfy audience desires for continuity, identity, and the thrill of fear. This approach has solidified the Indonesian horror genre as a powerful medium for cultural expression, sustaining its relevance and success in both local and broader cinematic landscapes.

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