

DECODING FEAR: SEMIOTIC INTERPRETATION OF CHILD IMAGERY IN INDONESIAN HORROR FILM POSTERS

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Received:
29 Agustus 2025

Revised:
11 November 2025

Accepted:
1 March 2026

Published:
24 March 2026

Anggraheni, D., Widodo, S. T., Wijaya, M., & Ardianto, D. T. (2023). Decoding fear: Semiotic interpretation of child imagery in Indonesian horror film posters. *Frasa: English Education and Literature Journal*, 7 (1), 68–82. <https://doi.org/10.47701/frasa.v7i1.5577>

Abstract

This study examines the representation of anxiety through child imagery in Indonesian horror film posters, employing Roland Barthes' semiotic framework. The depiction of children as protagonists in horror movie posters creates a complex interaction between innocence and terror, utilizing visual clues to elicit emotions and capture viewers' attention. The objective of this study is to analyze how children's visual representations evoke sensations of fear and anxiety by interpreting their denotative and connotative meanings. A qualitative content study was conducted on ten meticulously selected Indonesian horror movie posters, spanning from Danur (2017) to Taghut (2024). The study concentrates on visual elements, including lighting, color palettes, body posture, face expressions, and symbolic objects, to uncover the fundamental cultural and psychological significances. The results indicate that child imagery serves as a powerful semiotic tool that embodies socio-cultural anxieties around family, morality, and social norms, while simultaneously amplifying terror through the contrast of vulnerability with supernatural or perilous elements. This research demonstrates the use of Barthes' semiotic theory in interpreting complex visual texts and enhances our comprehension of horror aesthetics within Indonesian cinema. The study offers significant insights for scholars examining media semiotics, visual culture, and film studies, particularly those interested in the dynamics of terror representation in cinematic marketing.

Keywords: *Child imagery, Fear, Film poster*

INTRODUCTION

Film, as a cultural and narrative medium, plays a significant role in representing and constructing social realities through visual and symbolic elements. Through images, characters, and narratives, films are capable of conveying layered messages that extend beyond their surface stories, allowing audiences to interpret deeper social, political, and psychological dimensions. In this case, cinematic text can be approached as semiotic spaces where meaning is produced and negotiated, making them a relevant object of analysis. Understanding how symbols function within broader cultural discourses (Nugraha, Aulia C; Haryanti, 2025).

Horror film has long been recognized as a potent site for exploring societal anxieties, fears, and cultural norms (Mayangseto et al., 2023; Walsh, 2010). In Indonesia, the horror genre has experienced a remarkable resurgence in the last decade, reflecting both global cinematic trends and uniquely Indonesian social and cultural narratives (Rahmalina et al., 2025). One of the most striking aspects of contemporary Indonesian horror is the visual and narrative emphasis on children as central figures of fear, particularly in promotional materials such as film posters (Anggraheni, Widodo, et al., 2024a). These visual representations not only attract audiences but also encode complex cultural and psychological meanings, intertwining innocence with terror in ways that resonate deeply with viewers' cultural expectations and social anxieties.

Film posters are more than mere marketing tools; they function as semiotic texts that communicate messages about the film's content, themes, and emotional impact (Barthes, 1977a; Chandler, 2002). A film poster can be taken from the source, such as a novel, story book (Amri & Pratiwi, 2019). Within these posters, children often appear as symbols of vulnerability, purity, or the uncanny, generating a tension between the familiar and the threatening. Such representations exploit the viewer's empathetic responses and societal perceptions of childhood, transforming the child figure into a site of cultural fear (Droit-Volet et al., 2011). This tension is particularly salient in Indonesian horror, where the interplay between spiritual beliefs, folklore, and societal norms shapes the portrayal of fear and evil (Anggraheni, Widodo, et al., 2024b).

Previous research has highlighted various aspects of horror cinema and child representation. For instance, Widya et.al. (2024) explored the use of visual elements in Southeast Asian horror posters to evoke suspense and dread, emphasizing the role of lighting, color, and facial expression (Dewi et al., 2024). Similarly, Noer (2021) analyzed Indonesian horror films' narratives, illustrating how children often function as both victims and conduits for supernatural terror (Noer, 2021). Adnan et.al. (2023) analyse how the collisions between dominant myths and counter-myths and vice versa are described in three Indonesian horror movies (Adnan & Rahamad, 2023). While these studies provide valuable insights into horror aesthetics and narrative strategies, few have systematically examined child imagery in promotional posters as semiotic constructs, particularly using Roland Barthes' framework of denotation and connotation. This gap suggests a need to explore not only what these images show literally but also what they imply culturally and psychologically. This study offers novelty by shifting the focus from narrative analysis of Indonesian horror films to the semiotic examination of their promotional posters. By analyzing 10 posters from 2017 to 2024, it

identifies recurring visual strategies in the representation of children as the central figures of fear.

Roland Barthes' semiotic theory provides a robust approach to deciphering the intricate layers of meaning within visual texts. Barthes distinguishes between denotative signs, which convey literal meaning, and connotative signs, which carry cultural, ideological, and symbolic significance (Barthes, 1977a). Applying this framework to film posters enables researchers to analyze how visual components, such as posture, facial expression, color, and background, communicate fear beyond mere narrative description. For example, an image of a child with a pale face and wide eyes may literally indicate surprise or fear (denotation), but culturally it may evoke anxieties about innocence threatened by supernatural forces or societal dysfunction (connotation). In this sense, semiotic analysis helps uncover the ideological and emotional undertones that shape audience perception of horror (Anggraheni, Anandha, et al., 2024).

The contemporary Indonesian horror landscape, particularly between 2017 and 2024, provides a rich corpus for such an analysis. Films such as *Danur* (2017) and *Taghut* (2024) exemplify how children are visually foregrounded in posters, often depicted with expressions of terror, ghostly presence, or in eerie settings. These images do not merely advertise the film; they act as cultural texts, reflecting Indonesian conceptions of childhood, morality, and spiritual vulnerability (Frolova, 2020). Moreover, the consistent use of child imagery across a variety of horror films suggests a strategic semiotic function: children amplify emotional engagement while simultaneously tapping into deep-seated cultural fears related to innocence, familial protection, and the supernatural.

Analyzing these posters through a semiotic lens contributes not only to film studies but also to visual culture and media semiotics. Scholars have increasingly recognized the importance of marketing materials in shaping audience reception and expectation (Hall, 2005; Mulvey, 1975). Posters act as pre-texts, offering viewers a preliminary narrative and emotional framework before the film begins. By decoding the signs embedded in child imagery, researchers can better understand how fear is constructed and culturally mediated. This approach also highlights the interplay between global horror conventions such as the trope of the haunted child and local Indonesian cultural contexts, including beliefs in spirits, supernatural punishment, and the moral significance of children.

Furthermore, this study seeks to address an underexplored intersection between visual semiotics and horror marketing. While numerous studies have analyzed horror narratives or cinematic techniques, the semiotic potential of promotional imagery, especially in Indonesian horror, remains largely overlooked. By focusing on 10 posters from films released from 2017 to 2024, this research provides a systematic examination of how child imagery functions as a vehicle for fear, bridging the gap between cultural semiotics and film marketing analysis. The study's findings are expected to offer insights for scholars, filmmakers, and marketing practitioners interested in the psychological and cultural dimensions of horror promotion.

Examining child imagery in Indonesian horror film posters through Roland Barthes' semiotic lens offers a unique opportunity to understand the cultural encoding of fear. It illuminates how visual signs, both literal and symbolic, are employed to evoke emotional responses, engage audiences, and communicate complex cultural anxieties. By situating these

posters within the broader landscape of Indonesian horror and semiotic scholarship, this study contributes to a deeper appreciation of the aesthetic, cultural, and ideological dimensions of fear representation in contemporary cinema.

METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative research design, employing semiotic analysis to interpret child imagery in Indonesian horror film posters. Semiotics, as theorized by Roland Barthes (1977), provides a robust framework for analyzing visual texts, allowing the researcher to explore both denotative meanings, the literal or explicit content, and connotative meanings, the cultural, ideological, and emotional associations embedded within visual signs (Barthes, 1977a). This approach enables a comprehensive understanding of how child imagery communicates fear and socio-cultural anxieties in contemporary Indonesian horror films.

Materials

The primary materials for this study are 10 Indonesian horror film posters released between 2017 and 2024. The posters were selected based on two criteria: first, the films must have been commercially released in Indonesian cinemas; second, the poster must feature a child character as the central visual element, portraying fear, terror, or vulnerability. The films analyzed include *Danur* (2017), *Danur 2: Maddah* (2018), *Danur 3* (2019), *Mati Anak* (2019), *Kelam* (2019), *Tebusan Dosa* (2019), *Waktu Magrib* (2023), *Rumah Dinas Bapak* (2024), *Petak Umpet* (2024), and *Taghut* (2024). These posters were sourced from official film websites, online promotional material, and verified film databases, ensuring the authenticity and quality of the visual material.

Method of Analysis

The analysis consists of several sequential steps designed to ensure systematic and rigorous interpretation of the visual data. First, each poster was examined individually to identify primary visual elements, including facial expressions, body posture, lighting, color schemes, background elements, and symbolic objects. Each element was documented through descriptive notes, highlighting observable denotative features.

Second, the posters were analyzed for connotative meanings, interpreting how these visual elements generate emotional responses, particularly fear, and reflect broader socio-cultural anxieties. For example, a child's wide-eyed expression or pale skin may symbolize vulnerability, while dark or desaturated colors create a foreboding atmosphere. The semiotic analysis also considered cultural and ideological contexts, such as Indonesian spiritual beliefs, folklore, and societal concerns about innocence and moral order.

Finally, the study employed cross-comparison and thematic categorization, identifying recurring visual motifs and narrative patterns across the 10 posters. This step allows the researcher to draw broader conclusions about how child imagery functions consistently as a semiotic tool in Indonesian horror film marketing.

Ethical Considerations

This research focuses exclusively on publicly available visual materials; no human subjects were involved. The posters were cited accurately and properly attributed, and the analysis respects intellectual property rights and cultural sensitivity.

Procedures

The analysis of the ten Indonesian horror film posters, released between 2017 and 2024, followed a structured, qualitative procedure grounded in Roland Barthes' semiotic theory. The goal was to decode both the denotative and connotative meanings embedded in child imagery, revealing how fear and cultural anxieties are visually constructed. The procedure consisted of the following steps:

1. Selection of Posters
 - a. Ten posters featuring child characters as the central visual element were selected.
 - b. Films analyzed ranged from 2017 to 2024.
 - c. Posters were sourced from official film websites, verified promotional material, and online film databases to ensure authenticity.
2. Preliminary Observation
 - a. The poster was carefully examined for its overall visual composition, noting color schemes, lighting, background elements, and placement of the child figure.
 - b. Immediate impressions of fear, tension, and mood were recorded to guide further analysis.
3. Make a Film Poster Code to make the analysis easier to describe.
4. Denotative Analysis

Literal visual elements were documented, including:

 - a. Facial expressions of children (e.g., fear, surprise, sadness)
 - b. Body posture and gestures indicating vulnerability or tension
 - c. Surrounding environment such as shadows, supernatural figures, or isolated settings
 - d. Symbolic objects like dolls, masks, or cultural artifacts that hint at a narrative context

Each element was catalogued systematically for comparison across all ten posters.
5. Connotative Analysis

Cultural and emotional meanings were interpreted by considering:

 - a. Indonesian societal values, spiritual beliefs, and moral expectations
 - b. Folkloric references and supernatural symbolism
 - c. Psychological impact of child vulnerability on audience perception

This step identified how child imagery serves as a semiotic tool to amplify fear, moral tension, and cultural anxiety.
6. Pattern Identification

Recurring motifs and strategies were compared across posters, focusing on:

 - a. Innocence versus threat
 - b. Isolation and vulnerability
 - c. Cultural anchoring of fear through spiritual or folklore elements

Patterns were tabulated and categorized to provide systematic insights into visual and cultural semiotics.
7. Synthesis and Interpretation











Denotative and connotative findings were synthesized to develop a comprehensive understanding of:

- a. How child imagery communicates fear visually
- b. How cultural, moral, and spiritual elements shape the semiotic message

This synthesis formed the basis for the Analysis and Discussion section of the study.

Data Analysis

Here are the 10 Film posters that are analyzed with Roland Barthes' semiotic framework. All posters taken from IMDb Website https://www.imdb.com/?ref=tt_nv_home.

			
Figure 1. 2017 (DNR2017)	Figure 2. 2018 (DNR2018)	Figure 3. 2019 (DNR2019)	Figure 4. 2019 (MTA2019)
			
Figure 5. 2019 (KLM2019)	Figure 6. 2024 (TBD2024)	Figure 7. 2023 (WTM2013)	Figure 8. 2024 (RDB2024)
			
Figure 9. 2024 (PTU2019)	Figure 10. 2024 (TGT2019)		

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of 10 Indonesian horror film posters released from 2017 to 2024 reveals a consistent, deliberate use of child imagery to evoke fear and cultural anxieties. By applying Roland Barthes' semiotic framework, each visual element can be interpreted on both denotative and connotative levels, demonstrating how innocence, vulnerability, and the supernatural intersect in promotional material. Roland Barthes positions images not as neutral reflections of reality, but as systems of signs that actively produce meaning in culture (Barus & Siregar, 2025).

In visual communication (including posters), meaning is created through the relationship between a signifier (the visible form: a face, a shadow, a doll, a color) and the signified (the concept it evokes: fear, innocence, danger, death). Barthes argues that images communicate through layers and that their persuasive power lies precisely in how they appear "natural," even though they are culturally constructed.

Table 1. Poster Analysis

No	Poster Code	Denotative	Connotative
1.	DNR2017	Four children have a flat expression, and three of them are ghosts with scars on their faces. Three pale-faced children with blank expressions stand behind her, one holding a violin. Their translucent bodies signify that they are ghosts. Color and lighting: Dominated by black, white, and gray tones with a touch of red in the title, emphasizing the eerie and chilling atmosphere	The presence of ghost children symbolizes the connection between the innocence of childhood and the supernatural world. They are not fully portrayed as threats, but rather as "companions" to Risa, reflecting themes of loneliness and the search for friendship. The black-and-white palette conveys horror, mystery, and a world of shadows, while the red text signifies blood, danger, and death
2.	DNR2018	A woman (Prilly Latuconsina as Risa) dressed in white is being grabbed from behind by a ghostly female figure with long hair and pale skin. Her expression is fearful, and her body leans backward as if pulled by a supernatural force. Five ghost children sit on the floor in front of her, seen from behind, all facing the scene. Their identical clothing and posture suggest unity or ritualistic witnessing. A dark, empty wooden room lit only by dim candles placed around the children, enhancing the mysterious and eerie atmosphere.	White often connotes purity and innocence, but in horror contexts, it can also suggest vulnerability and spiritual exposure. Her being attacked contrasts purity with evil forces. The Ghost Children Sitting: Their passive presence signifies witnesses of horror. They are not aggressive, but their role reinforces Risa's loneliness—ghosts surround her, yet she lacks human allies. It also connotes a ritualistic or theatrical dimension, as if they are an audience watching her struggle. Dark Wooden Room with Candles: Connotes confinement, isolation, and an old, haunted house atmosphere. The candles symbolize spiritual

		energy, ritual, or attempts to connect with the spirit world.
3.	DNR2019	<p>A young woman (Risa) is crawling on the floor with a terrified expression, reaching toward the viewer. Her clothes are white but stained with blood, symbolizing a struggle. Six ghost children stand around the room, positioned in a semi-circle, as if observing the scene. Each child wears outdated clothes, pale expressions, and one still holds a violin. Color Palette: Dominated by dark red, black, and sepia tones, creating an eerie, suffocating atmosphere.</p> <p>Risa Crawling on the Floor: Connotes helplessness, vulnerability, and desperation. Her reaching hand towards the viewer may symbolize a plea for help, breaking the boundary between fiction and the audience. Ghost Children's Semi-Circle Formation: Connotes ritual, judgment, or silent witnessing. Their neutral stance suggests they are not direct threats, but guardians of the supernatural realm or passive companions in Risa's ordeal. Color Red and Shadows: Symbolize death, violence, and psychological terror. The dim lighting creates an oppressive feeling of entrapment, aligning with the meaning of "Sunyaruri" (silence, emptiness).</p>
4.	MTA2019	<p>A woman (Cinta Laura Kiehl) sits on a chair, surrounded by several children. She is holding the hand of one child and resting her arm on another's shoulder, suggesting closeness. The children's faces are blurred or erased, leaving them faceless. Background: Behind them is a mirror reflecting a dark, ghostly figure with glowing red eyes. Colors & Lighting: The poster uses a muted, dark palette of brown, grey, and black, creating a somber and unsettling atmosphere.</p> <p>The Faceless Children: Connotes the loss of identity, innocence, and humanity. In horror semiotics, facelessness symbolizes dehumanization, anonymity of suffering, or spirits trapped without peace. It suggests that these children are no longer part of the living world. The Woman's Position: She appears protective yet powerless, holding the children's hands but unable to "save" them. This reflects themes of maternal instinct, guardianship, and helplessness in the face of supernatural forces. Dark Color Palette: Evokes mourning, grief, and death. It visually aligns with the film's title, preparing the audience for themes of loss and the uncanny.</p>
5.	KLM2019	<p>Main Visual: A little girl in a white dress stands in a doorway, looking back with a serious, almost lifeless expression. She holds a stuffed bunny doll that appears dirty, with red stains resembling blood. Several dark, monstrous hands</p> <p>The Little Girl in White symbolizes innocence and purity, but in horror imagery, also vulnerability and victimhood. Her blank expression adds to the uncanny effect, suggesting possession, trauma, or otherworldly influence. Dolls and toys</p>

	<p>emerge from the edges of the doorframe, reaching toward the girl. Behind the doorway is a dark forest with a red, ominous glow, suggesting danger. The room she stands in looks old and abandoned, with cracked wallpaper, a broken wall, and worn furniture (a rocking horse and a wooden chair).</p>	<p>in horror often signify corrupted childhood innocence. The bloodstains connote violence, broken safety, and foreshadow terror. Dark Hands from the Doorway: Represent supernatural forces trying to drag the child into the unknown. The doorway itself connotes a threshold between safety (home) and danger (the spirit world).</p>
<p>6. TBD2024</p>	<p>Two female characters (Happy Salma and Putri Marino) and a male figure in the backdrop make up the three main figures. They all appear stiff and somber. The eerie atmosphere is further enhanced by the shadowy, fuzzy face of an enigmatic child dressed in scarlet sitting in the lower left corner. A chilly and depressing atmosphere is created by the color palette, which is dominated by frigid blue, gray, and black tones with very little warm hue. Ghostly Figure: Partially hidden by fog or glass, a pale, skeleton ghost with hollow eyes appears on the left.</p>	<p>The Ghostly Figure: Represents guilt, past sins, or unresolved wrongdoings haunting the present. Its skeletal and decayed form connotes death, corruption, and moral decay. Two Women as Central Figures: Their serious expressions suggest they are key to the narrative, possibly carriers of secrets, trauma, or family conflicts. Their positioning also emphasizes female subjectivity in confronting horror. The Child in Red: The blurred face suggests anonymity or being erased, symbolizing lost innocence, family secrets, or silenced victims. Red connotes blood, sacrifice, and danger, reinforcing the theme of sin.</p>
<p>7. WTM2013</p>	<p>Main Visual: A child with long braids is sitting cross-legged on the ground, facing forward. The child's reflection on the ground is distorted and eerie showing a darker, more sinister face, with glowing eyes, unlike the innocent posture above. Background: The ground is filled with scribbles or markings, resembling chalk drawings or ritualistic patterns. The setting is dim, almost twilight.</p>	<p>The Child with Braids: On the surface, it connotes innocence, typical childhood, and playfulness. However, paired with the distorted reflection, it suggests duality innocence above, darkness beneath. The reflection conveys the theme of hidden evil or inner transformation. It hints that what looks normal in daylight may hide something sinister when night comes. Twilight Setting (Maghrib Time): In Indonesian culture, <i>maghrib</i> (sunset prayer time) carries strong connotations. It is often seen as a liminal time when supernatural beings roam freely, and children are warned not to play outside. Chalk Markings: Suggest children's games but also resonate with mystical or ritualistic</p>

			elements, blurring the line between play and the supernatural.
8.	RDB2024	Main Visual: A group of seven people (family members) are stacked and clinging together in a vertical, comedic pile. The man at the center (likely "Bapak") is carrying the weight, while others hold onto him and each other. The background shows an old, dimly lit house interior, with patterned tile flooring, wooden furniture, and a shadowy atmosphere. Each character displays exaggerated facial expressions of fear, surprise, or panic.	Stacked Family Pose: Suggests unity and chaos at the same time. It connotes how a family (or group of people) must cling together in the face of danger, yet the arrangement looks humorous, suggesting the film blends horror with comedy. Connotes a haunted or mysterious government house (<i>rumah dinas</i>). Such houses often carry associations with bureaucracy, hierarchy, and colonial or official power structures, linking the supernatural with institutional history. Lighting and Colors: Dark teal and dim lighting create a horror mood, but the bright and expressive faces of the cast undercut it with humor. This signals the film's genre mix: horror-comedy.
9.	PTU2019	Main Visual: A young child, dressed in simple clothes, crouches against the wall with a frightened expression, as if hiding. Ghostly Figure: Behind the window in the shadows, a pale, long-haired ghostly entity lurks, its gaze fixed on the child. Color Palette: Dominated by dark blue, black, and shadowy tones, with the red title standing out.	The Child: Represents innocence and vulnerability. Children are often used in horror to heighten tension because their helplessness amplifies danger. A childhood game becomes sinister here. The title suggests that something playful (hide and seek) has turned deadly. This transformation connotes the corruption of innocence and safety into fear and danger. Represents the hidden threat that is always "seeking" the child. It connects to the cultural fear of unseen forces preying on the innocent. Dark Shadows and Window Setting: Windows symbolize thresholds—what is inside vs. outside, safe vs. unsafe. The ghost outside the window implies that evil is constantly watching, waiting for a moment to enter.
10.	TGT2019	Main Visual: A woman (Yasmin Napper) and a child stand in front, both looking tense and fearful. Behind them looms a monstrous figure with blood on its chest, its decayed hand gripping their heads. The woman wears simple	The Gripping Hand: Connotes domination and control. The fact that the monster's hand rests on both the woman and child suggests oppression, curse, or spiritual possession. It symbolizes how evil forces enslave the innocent. Blood

white attire, her expression a mix of fear and defiance. The child looks terrified, eyes widened, mouth open as if about to scream. Background: Dimly lit, with hanging white shrouds resembling burial cloths (*kain kafan*), contributing to a mortuary atmosphere.

implies violence, death, and sacrificial horror. The facelessness of the monster emphasizes its identity as a symbol of pure terror, not just a character. White, usually associated with purity and innocence, contrasts with the violence surrounding them. In Indonesian horror, white clothing often signifies ritual or funeral imagery, heightening the tension between life and death.

Denotative Analysis: Observing the Literal Signs

At the denotative level, all analyzed posters feature children as the central figure, often depicted in states of fear or distress. For example, in the poster of *Danur* (2017), the child's wide eyes and open mouth suggest surprise or terror, while the dimly lit background conveys a haunted or supernatural environment. Similarly, in *Taghut* (2024), a child is shown isolated in the foreground, framed by dark shadows and ominous figures looming behind, creating a stark visual emphasis on vulnerability.

Other recurring elements include:

- a. Facial expressions: Fear, shock, or sadness dominate, communicating the immediate emotional state of the child.
- b. Body posture: Children are often crouched, reaching out, or retreating, physically expressing their confrontation with unknown threats.
- c. Lighting and color: Dark tones, muted colors, and sharp contrasts dominate the posters, visually encoding a sense of danger.
- d. Symbolic objects: Dolls, masks, or supernatural figures in the background hint at the horror narrative, foreshadowing events in the film.

These denotative elements provide the literal content of the posters, establishing the foundation for further connotative interpretation.

Connotative Analysis: Interpreting Cultural and Emotional Meanings

At the connotative level, child imagery functions as a semiotic tool to evoke not only fear but also societal anxieties. Children, universally associated with innocence and vulnerability, become symbolic vessels through which horror is intensified (Melamed & et al, 1978). In Indonesian cultural contexts, the supernatural is often intertwined with notions of morality, spirituality, and familial protection. Therefore, the depiction of a child in distress signals not only imminent physical danger but also moral and spiritual threat.

For instance, in *Danur 2: Maddah* (2018), the child is surrounded by ghostly figures whose distorted forms and unnatural movements evoke both fear and fascination. The visual tension between innocence and supernatural malevolence taps into viewers' subconscious fears of moral transgression and spiritual punishment.

Repeated motifs across the posters, such as dim lighting, isolated figures, and ominous background imagery, suggest a deliberate semiotic strategy. These elements communicate

layers of fear: the immediate, visceral fear of the unknown and a culturally mediated fear grounded in societal norms, spiritual beliefs, and the protective instinct toward children.

Themes and Patterns

Cross-comparison of all 10 posters identifies three major semiotic patterns:

a. Innocence vs. Threat

Children represent innocence in the face of evil or supernatural forces, intensifying the emotional impact. The frequent usage of child images in all posters serves as a symbol of moral purity, emotional openness, and innocence. The child is merely a character in the story universe in the denotative layer. At the connotative level, however, the child turns into a symbolic tool that raises the stakes for horror: when innocence is juxtaposed with evil, the emotional resonance is heightened, causing the spectator to feel a protective impulse.

This dynamic is further reinforced through *mise-en-scène* dim lighting around the child, looming shadows, or unseen forces behind them, suggesting that malevolent entities intrude upon spaces that should be safe. The ideological effect aligns with a broader cultural myth: the belief that evil forces prey upon the morally “clean” or spiritually unprepared, a recurring theme in Indonesian folklore and religious teachings. Thus, the posters construct fear not only as harm to the body but as a corruption of innocence, transforming the child into a symbolic battlefield between purity and danger

b. Isolation and Vulnerability

Positioning of children in the poster foreground, often separated from adults or safe spaces, emphasizes the threat level and engages audience empathy. Spatial composition in the posters, foreground placement, central framing, or distancing from adults creates a visual grammar of vulnerability. Children are positioned alone, often facing the viewer directly or standing before an expansive darkness. Denotatively, this is a simple staging choice; connotatively, it encodes existential exposure.

The lack of protective figures (parents, guardians, community) amplifies the perception that the child must confront danger without social or emotional support. This communicates a deeper ideological message: fear intensifies when social structures fail, mirroring anxieties in Indonesian society regarding family disintegration, urban migration, and weakening communal bonds.

Poster design choices, spaces, blurred backgrounds, or unreachable horizons produce a semiotic sense of isolation that primes audiences to interpret the narrative as a struggle for survival. The poster thus becomes not merely promotional but an emotional cue inviting empathetic engagement. The vulnerability displayed encourages audiences to imagine themselves or loved ones in similar peril, strengthening the psychological grip of the horror.

c. Cultural Anchoring of Fear

Folkloric symbols, shadowy rural landscapes, and spiritual motifs encode Indonesian socio-cultural fears, making the horror culturally specific and psychologically compelling. Unlike Western horror, Indonesian posters embed distinctly local signifiers, such as folkloric creatures, traditional clothing, shadow puppetry silhouettes, graveyard symbols, or rural household architecture. These elements anchor the narrative within Indonesia’s socio-cultural archive.

At the denotative level, these symbols represent narrative settings. At the connotative level, they invoke collective memory and shared cultural anxieties. Shadowy forest backdrops evoke rural mysticism; spiritual motifs such as prayer beads, Qur'anic calligraphy, or ritual objects signify the tension between sacred and profane. These motifs encode what Barthes calls myth: a cultural narrative that naturalizes the idea that the unseen world permeates everyday life. Indonesian audiences, who are familiar with narratives of spirits, ancestral curses, and supernatural retribution, decode these symbols almost automatically.

Thus, the posters become culturally resonant texts that communicate: "*Fear here is born from our own heritage.*" This cultural specificity differentiates Indonesian horror from global trends and reinforces its psychological impact, making the fear intimate rather than foreign.

These patterns reveal that the use of child imagery is a strategic narrative and marketing tool, designed to heighten emotional engagement while reflecting local cultural concerns. Through Barthes' semiotics, it becomes evident that fear is not merely visual but socially constructed, intertwined with cultural values, spiritual beliefs, and societal expectations.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that child imagery in Indonesian horror film posters, released from 2017 to 2024, is a deliberate semiotic strategy used to evoke fear and communicate cultural anxieties. Through the lens of Roland Barthes' semiotics, it is evident that the posters operate on two levels of meaning. Denotatively, children are portrayed with fearful expressions, isolated postures, and surrounded by dark or supernatural elements, providing the literal visual cues of horror. Connotatively, these images tap into culturally mediated fears, such as vulnerability, morality, spirituality, and societal norms, reflecting Indonesian socio-cultural contexts.

The analysis also identifies recurring patterns across posters: the juxtaposition of innocence versus threat, the emphasis on isolation and vulnerability, and the integration of cultural and spiritual motifs. These patterns suggest that the depiction of children is not merely an aesthetic choice but a semiotic mechanism that heightens emotional impact, strengthens narrative anticipation, and resonates with audience sensibilities.

From a theoretical perspective, the study confirms the utility of Barthes' semiotic framework in decoding visual culture, illustrating how seemingly simple images can convey layered meanings influenced by local folklore, societal values, and psychological perceptions of fear (Barthes, 1977b).

Two main recommendations come from this study. First, filmmakers and marketing teams can use these semiotic strategies to make better posters that grab people's attention and build narrative tension. Second, for academics, subsequent research may investigate audience reception of child imagery in horror posters, contrasting perceived fear responses across various cultural contexts, or analyzing the evolving semiotics of horror in the digital era.

In conclusion, the use of children in Indonesian horror movie posters is more than just a visual effect; it is a cultural text that expresses fear, moral concerns, and social anxieties that

deeply affect viewers. Researchers and practitioners alike learn more about how visual media, emotions, and cultural meaning all come together when they decode these signs. Indonesian horror films often use children as the main characters because they represent innocence facing evil or supernatural forces, which makes the story more powerful.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

Author 1: Coming up with ideas, making a plan, collecting data, doing formal analysis, writing the first draft, and overseeing the work. Author 2: Writing, reviewing, and editing, as well as methodology, investigation, and semiotic analysis. Author 3: Collecting data, looking at it visually, reviewing the literature, writing, and editing. Author 4: Checking the results, getting the right resources, writing, and reviewing and editing.

All authors have read and approved the final manuscript and agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author sincerely thanks all promoters and co-promoters for their invaluable guidance and constructive suggestions, which greatly enhanced the quality of this study. Appreciation is also extended to colleagues and peers who supported data collection and analysis. This research a frasFoundation and Universitas Semarang (USM).

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