Semiotic Analysis of the *Sumala* Movie Poster Through Saussure's Theory

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Abstract

This research aims to analyze the poster of the movie *Sumala* using Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic theory. The purpose of this analysis is to understand how the visual and textual elements of the poster convey meaning to the audience. The study employs a qualitative method, focusing on the concepts of *signifier*, *signified*, and *sign*. The findings show that the poster's use of dark colors, the image of a girl holding a knife and a severed head, and the Javanese text contribute to creating a sense of fear and mystery, appealing to local cultural context and horror genre conventions. The poster's combination of linguistic and visual signs is effective in establishing the horror theme and cultural relevance. This article further discusses how Saussure's theory helps in interpreting the symbolism and communication strategies used in the poster.

Keywords: *Semiotics*, *Saussure*, *movie poster*, *Sumala*, *visual analysis*

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis poster film *Sumala* menggunakan teori semiotika Ferdinand de Saussure. Tujuan analisis ini adalah untuk memahami bagaimana elemen visual dan tekstual pada poster menyampaikan makna kepada audiens. Studi ini menggunakan metode kualitatif, dengan fokus pada konsep penanda (*signifier*), petanda (*signified*), dan tanda (*sign*). Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa penggunaan warna gelap, gambar seorang gadis yang memegang pisau dan kepala yang terpenggal, serta teks berbahasa Jawa berkontribusi pada penciptaan rasa takut dan misteri, sekaligus menghubungkan konteks budaya lokal dan konvensi genre horor. Kombinasi tanda linguistik dan visual pada poster efektif dalam menegaskan tema horor dan relevansi budaya. Artikel ini juga membahas bagaimana teori Saussure membantu dalam menginterpretasikan simbolisme dan strategi komunikasi yang digunakan pada poster.

Kata Kunci: *Semiotika, Saussure, poster film, Sumala, analisis visual*

Introduction

This study analyzes the poster of the film Sumala using the semiotic theory proposed by Ferdinand de Saussure. Specifically, the research aims to examine how the visual and textual elements of the poster convey meaning through the concepts of signifier, signified, and sign. Film posters serve as a form of visual communication designed to capture the audience's attention while conveying specific information and messages. Therefore, the scope of this research includes an analysis of various elements

within the poster, such as color, imagery, text, and cultural symbols related to the film's context.

Previous literature on film poster analysis through semiotics has been extensively explored, especially within the horror genre. Several studies, including those by Chandler (2007) and Barthes (1964), indicate that film posters function not only as promotional tools but also as representations of ideology and culture. Moreover, Eco's (1976) semiotic research highlights the significance of analyzing visual elements in uncovering hidden messages behind text and images. However, studies focusing on the application of Saussure's theory in local film posters, particularly those incorporating regional cultural elements like the Sumala poster, remain limited.

The novelty of this research lies in its emphasis on the incorporation of local cultural elements, such as the use of the Javanese language and traditional horror symbols, in generating meaning through a Saussurean semiotic approach. The Sumala poster provides an opportunity to understand how the visual and linguistic signs presented can influence viewers' perceptions of horror themes and cultural relevance.

The main issue addressed in this study is how the visual elements and text in the Sumala poster operate semiotically to shape perceptions of fear and mystery. The objective of this article is to reveal how Saussure's theory can be utilized to interpret the signs present in this poster and how these signs generate powerful messages and meanings within the cultural and horror genre contexts.

Method

This study employs a qualitative method with a semiotic approach based on Ferdinand de Saussure's theory. This method was selected because it is suitable for analyzing the visual and textual signs present in the Sumala film poster. The research aims to elucidate how these elements function as signs conveying meaning to the audience.

The object of this research is the Sumala film poster, released in 2024. This poster is analyzed to understand how the use of visual and textual elements shapes meaning through the signs it contains.

The primary instrument in this study is the researcher themselves, acting as the data collector and analyzer. In semiotic research, the researcher serves as a "human instrument" interpreting the existing visual and linguistic signs. The data consists of the poster images and the text displayed within it, analyzed based on the concepts of signifier, signified, and sign.

Data were gathered through documentation of the Sumala film poster. The poster was analyzed in-depth to identify elements functioning as signifiers and how these elements are connected to their corresponding signifieds. Data collection also included identifying visual elements such as color, symbols, text, and image composition.

The analysis technique used in this research is Saussurean semiotic analysis, which consists of two main stages. The first stage involves identifying the signifiers and

signifieds in the visual and textual elements of the poster. The second stage examines the relationship between signifiers and signifieds to produce meaning (*sign*). Through this process, the researcher identifies the hidden messages behind the signs present in the poster.

This study also analyzes how the visual elements of the poster, such as dark colors, character images, and Javanese text, contribute to creating an atmosphere of horror and fear. The results of this analysis are expected to provide insights into the visual communication strategies employed in the Sumala poster.

Result and Discussion

This study yields significant findings regarding the semiotic analysis of the Sumala film poster using Saussure's theory. The poster effectively creates a strong horror atmosphere through the use of visual and linguistic signs. Several key elements within the poster will be objectively explained through the concepts of signifier and signified from Saussure, as well as being linked to other relevant research findings.

The signifier is the physical or material form of a sign. In the context of the poster, signifiers can include visual elements such as images, colors, texts, or symbols that are visible on the poster. The signified is the meaning or concept represented by the signifier. In other words, the signified is the message or idea behind the signifier. For example, an image of a knife may signify violence or danger, while dark colors could signify fear or a mysterious atmosphere.

1. The Use of Dark Colors as a Signifier of Fear

a) Signifier - Dark Colors as Visual Signs

Dark colors, such as black and muted green, serve as visual elements functioning as signifiers. These signifiers are physical aspects that the

audience can directly observe. In the horror genre, the use of dark colors conventionally aims to create a gloomy, mysterious, and frightening atmosphere. These colors are generally associated with unpleasant or dangerous elements.

Black is often seen as a symbol of darkness, death, or the unknown. Visually, black evokes a sense of fear or taboo.

Muted green gives an impression of "sickness" or "decay," often linked to something unhealthy or supernatural, thus adding to the eerie ambiance.

b) Signified - The Meaning Behind Dark Colors

Behind the dark colors as signifiers, there exists a concept or signified, which is the meaning formed in the audience's mind. In this context, the signified meanings that emerge include:

- Darkness, representing the unknown and often containing hidden dangers. This creates feelings of uncertainty and anxiety in the viewers.
- Mystery, which makes the audience feel curious yet uncomfortable, as the mystery presented usually involves supernatural elements or evil forces.
- Fear, the primary emotion intended to be evoked in horror films. The use of dark colors leads the audience to expect an intense horror experience, where they will feel deep fear.

c) Conventions in the Horror Genre

Dark colors like black and muted green are widely used in the horror genre. This color usage is a convention adopted in various horror visual works to create a specific atmosphere. Audiences familiar with the horror genre will easily associate these colors with frightening elements, such as death, violence, or supernatural mysteries.

d) The Role of Color in Visual Media

These findings align with Roland Barthes' (1964) research, which emphasizes that in visual media, color is not merely a decorative element but plays a crucial role in shaping meaning and emotions. Barthes demonstrated that each visual element, including color, has the capacity to communicate specific messages to the audience. Therefore, the use of color in the Sumala poster becomes an important tool in creating an atmosphere consistent with the horror theme.

e) Guiding Audience Expectations

When viewers see a poster dominated by dark colors, they immediately associate it with feelings of fear and uncertainty. This signals to them the type

of experience they will encounter in the film, which is an intense, suspenseful journey filled with mystery and unexpected danger. These colors automatically prepare the audience to enter an intense horror world.

The signifier of dark colors in the poster effectively creates the signified of fear and anxiety, guiding audience expectations regarding the horror theme in the film Sumala. These results align with Barthes' (1964) research, which shows that color in visual media plays an important role in shaping meaning and feelings.

2. Image of the Character with a Knife and a Decapitated Head

a) Signifier - Image of the Character with a Knife and a Decapitated Head

The depiction of the main character wielding a knife and holding a decapitated head serves as a striking and powerful visual signifier. This imagery can be interpreted as a symbol of physical violence, immediately capturing the audience's attention due to the presence of objects that are universally linked to danger and death.

The knife, as a sharp object, is commonly associated with violence, murder, or perilous actions. In the context of horror films, it acts as a universal symbol of extreme violence.

The decapitated head explicitly represents brutality and chaos. It not only signifies death but a violent death, underscoring that something very dangerous and uncontrollable is present within the film's narrative.

b) Signified - The Meaning of Violence, Chaos, and Threat

Beneath these images lies a deeper meaning intended for the audience, which includes:

- Violence

    The imagery clearly illustrates brutal physical violence. The knife and decapitated head directly indicate that the film contains elements of violence central to its conflict or storyline.

- Chaos

    The decapitated head signifies a loss of control and the presence of chaos in the narrative. This conveys a sense that the world within the film is filled with brutality and lacks safety, a key element in the horror genre.

- Threat

    These visual elements communicate to the audience that the characters in the film will be in great danger, fostering expectations of tension and fear during the viewing experience.

From a semiotic perspective, the signified aspects of these elements extend beyond mere violent objects to encompass psychological threats, namely the feelings of insecurity and fear faced by both the characters and potentially the audience.

c) Conventions in Horror Film Posters

Horror film posters often display violent elements to capture audience attention and provide hints about the film's themes. Visual elements like knives, blood, and injured or severed bodies have become part of the horror visual language. These signs are quickly interpreted by audiences as indicators of an intense and suspenseful horror genre.

As explained by Chandler (2007) in his research on visual semiotics, film posters employ symbols familiar to the audience to create rapid and direct meanings. In the case of horror films, violence and threats are central elements frequently utilized to engage viewers and communicate the intensity of the experiences they will encounter.

d) Attention Grabber and Emotion Trigger

One of the primary objectives of incorporating violent visual elements in film posters is to elicit emotions from the audience. The images of the knife and decapitated head visually convey a signal of real threat, directly triggering curiosity, fear, or a desire to know more about the film's plot. Consequently, this poster aims to establish an emotional engagement with the viewers even before they watch the film.

Chandler's (2007) study on visual semiotics in film posters highlights that such visual elements are employed to convey messages in a direct and efficient manner. In film posters, each visual element is designed to communicate a specific meaning to the audience. Chandler emphasizes that in the horror genre, images of violence or threats, like knives and severed bodies, become a

convention frequently used to enhance the impression of horror and tension. This represents an effective form of visual communication that utilizes universal symbols to convey the story, mood, and themes of the film.

The image of the character holding a knife and a decapitated head in the poster for Sumala functions as a powerful visual signifier, denoting violence, chaos, and threat. This element not only visually attracts the audience's attention but also shapes their expectations for a film rife with violence and tension. This aligns with the conventions of horror films and is thoroughly discussed in Chandler's (2007) visual semiotics, where film posters use violent elements as effective communication tools to build meaning and horror atmosphere.

3. The Use of Javanese Text
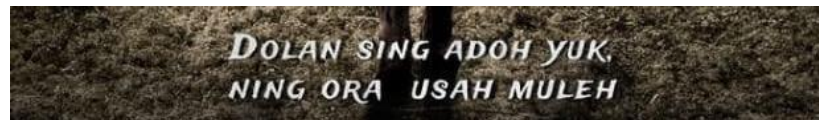
a) Signifier - Javanese Text as a Linguistic and Visual Sign

The Javanese text that reads "*DOLAN SING ADOH YUK NING ORA USAH MULEH*" serves as a strong visual and linguistic sign on the poster. This signifier not only acts as a design element but also bridges communication with audiences who understand Javanese.

The use of Javanese as a linguistic element connects the film to local traditions, directly engaging viewers from Central Java and its surroundings. Visually, this text reinforces the horror theme, which may relate to Javanese myths or folklore, highlighting that the use of local language often emphasizes the specific local context within the film's narrative.

The phrase ("*Let's go on an adventure far away, but don't come back*") carries an ambiguous meaning that piques curiosity. In a horror context, it can be interpreted as a warning or threat, adding tension to the visual aspect of the poster.

b) Signified - The Meaning of Cultural Connection and Local Identity

The signified meaning derived from this Javanese text is much deeper than a mere sentence. Some significant meanings include:

- Local Cultural Connection

  The use of Javanese highlights that the film has strong cultural roots, suggesting that its story is likely influenced by local customs, myths, or traditions known to the community. This gives viewers from Central Java and nearby areas a sense of connection, as if the film is "speaking" directly to them through a language they comprehend.

- Local Identity

Audiences who understand this language will feel that the film reflects their cultural identity. This creates a stronger emotional bond between local viewers and the film, as they can see themselves represented in the language and possibly in the storyline as well.

- Ambiguous and Horror-Laden Meaning

The phrase also conveys a sense of threat, enhancing the horror element in the poster. The message of "not coming back" can be interpreted as a warning about a perilous or mysterious journey, inviting viewers to experience tension and anxiety right from the poster.

c) The Role of Cultural Context in Meaning Formation

Umberto Eco (1976) emphasizes the importance of cultural context in forming meanings of linguistic and visual signs. In the case of the Javanese text on the Sumala poster, the cultural context greatly influences audience interpretation. Local Audience

Viewers from Central Java and its vicinity will easily grasp the meaning of this text because they understand the language and the cultural nuances embedded within it. For them, this text represents more than just a sentence; it embodies part of their identity and cultural experiences, possibly referencing local myths or legends.

- Non-Local Audience

For those unfamiliar with Javanese, the text might still be visually appealing, but its cultural significance may be less impactful. Nonetheless, it hints that the film is set within a specific cultural context, which could add a sense of exoticism or intrigue for further exploration.

According to Eco, the meaning of a sign cannot be separated from the socio-cultural context in which it arises. The Javanese text in this poster creates a deeper connection with the local audience while providing a unique identity to the Sumala film as a product that is not only global (in the horror genre) but also carries strong local cultural values.

d) Reinforcement of Horror Theme Through Text

The phrase "*DOLAN SING ADOH YUK NING ORA USAH MULEH*" embodies elements of mystery and threat, aligning perfectly with the horror theme of Sumala. In the horror genre, the use of local language often amplifies the eerie or frightening aspects, as the language feels more "intimate" and resonates more deeply with local audiences.

Moreover, within Javanese culture, such phrases can be associated with local myths about dangerous adventures or journeys where characters encounter supernatural forces that prevent them from returning safely. This further accentuates the horror atmosphere intended to be conveyed.

Eco emphasizes that linguistic and visual signs are always understood within the cultural context they emerge from. In this case, the Javanese text on the Sumala poster operates as part of a cultural code that can only be fully appreciated by audiences with a similar cultural background.

Eco's concept of cultural code reading explains how these signs function on various levels of meaning. On one level, this text is a visual sign accessible to all audiences. However, for those with relevant cultural backgrounds, it serves as a tool to connect to deeper local meanings and cultural identities.

The Javanese text featured on the Sumala poster not only functions as a visual element but also carries a deeper significance as a marker of cultural connection. Its usage provides signs of identity and cultural linkage, making the film more relevant and meaningful to local viewers. Supported by Eco's research (1976), the cultural context plays a vital role in shaping the meanings of visual and linguistic signs, which in this case reinforces the horror theme and the cultural attachment to Javanese narratives in the film Sumala.

4. Comparison with Other Research

a) Violence and Darkness as Universal Signifiers

Violence, exemplified by the image of a character holding a knife and a severed head, along with the dominance of dark colors (black and dull green), are common elements in horror film posters. In semiotic analysis, these elements serve as signifiers that refer to violence, threats, and an unsettling atmosphere, aligning with audience expectations for horror films. Darkness, for instance, symbolizes mystery and fear, consistent with Dyer's (1993) findings that these visual elements are often employed to evoke discomfort and anxiety.

However, in the Sumala poster, these elements are not merely used for universal horror effects but also to highlight violence and danger that hold local

relevance. In Javanese culture, violence is frequently associated with supernatural concepts, enhancing the fear experienced by local audiences.

b) Local Text as a Cultural Code

A unique aspect of the Sumala poster is the use of Javanese text, which plays a crucial role in connecting the film with the local audience. The phrase "*DOLAN SING ADOH YUK NING ORA USAH MULEH*" functions not only as a horror warning but also as a cultural signifier that enriches the film experience. According to Dyer (1993), textual elements rooted in specific cultures can add a deeper layer of meaning, and in the case of Sumala, this text establishes a direct connection with viewers in Central Java and surrounding areas. The use of local language differentiates the Sumala poster from more generic horror posters, where the text is usually universal or global. Here, the Javanese text signifies cultural connectedness and local identity, which not only strengthens the emotional bond with the audience but also adds an authentic element that is often absent in Western horror posters.

c) Integration of Marketing Strategies and Cultural Values

Film posters are typically designed as promotional tools, primarily aimed at attracting viewers. However, the Sumala poster effectively combines this marketing strategy with local cultural values. The dark colors, frightening images, and Javanese text all serve as effective marketing instruments while simultaneously conveying profound cultural meanings for audiences familiar with the local context.

In terms of marketing, this approach enables the film to capture attention not just for its horror effects but also for its deeper cultural resonance, enhancing its appeal to local viewers. The visual and textual elements drawn from Javanese culture make the film more relevant and distinct amid a plethora of global horror films that often overlook cultural components.

d) Horror Meaning Reinforced by Saussure's Theory

Saussure's semiotic approach helps clarify how the elements in the Sumala poster function as interconnected signs. For instance, the dark colors act as signifiers of fear and mystery, while the signified is the anticipated sense of dread associated with the horror genre. Similarly, the image of the main character's violence serves as a signifier of threat and brutality, while the signified reflects the typical dangers presented in horror films.

The inclusion of Javanese text adds another layer of meaning, where the local language serves as a signifier providing signifieds of cultural connection and local identity. These elements collaborate to create a richer and deeper horror experience, merging universal fears with local connections.

e) Local Innovation in the Global Horror Context

The analysis reveals that the Sumala poster not only employs widely recognized visual codes in the horror genre, such as dark colors and violence, but also integrates local innovation through elements of Javanese culture. The incorporation of local cultural values enriches the overall meaning of the poster and creates a more profound experience for audiences familiar with that cultural context.

Scientifically, these findings contribute to a broader understanding of how visual and textual elements function in creating emotional experiences through a semiotic approach. The Sumala poster illustrates that visual codes do not have to be generic; they can be enhanced through the integration of local values to create deeper and more personal meanings for viewers.

The Sumala poster successfully combines universally recognized horror elements with local innovations based on Javanese culture. The use of dark colors, violent imagery, and Javanese text demonstrates how marketing strategies can synergize with cultural values to create a more authentic and immersive horror experience for local audiences. Through Saussure's semiotic theory, it becomes evident that each element of this poster has signifiers and signifieds that work together to reinforce meaning and horror experience for the audience.

Conclusion

The conclusion of the semiotic analysis of the Sumala film poster indicates that this poster effectively integrates visual and textual elements to convey horror themes while considering the local Javanese cultural context. Elements such as dark colors, violent imagery, and Javanese text serve not only to create a horror atmosphere but also to signify local cultural identity, adding deeper meaning for audiences familiar with that culture.

Signifiers like the use of dark colors and violence emphasize the feelings of fear and mystery that are typical within the horror genre, while the signified elements reflect the anticipated emotions of fear and anxiety from the audience. Conversely, the incorporation of local language acts as a signifier that enriches the horror experience through a stronger cultural connection, lending local relevance to the film.

The implications of this analysis suggest that visual strategies in promotional media, such as film posters, should not only take universal visual codes into account but also consider local innovations to create a more profound experience. This research has the potential to be further developed within a broader study of visual semiotics, particularly in the context of local culture utilized in film promotion..

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