

Roland Barthes' Semiotic Analysis Of The Film Poster For Lila's Story

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Abstract

A film poster is a visual communication medium that serves to introduce a film and build audience expectations through the use of visual signs. This study aims to analyze the denotative, connotative, and mythical meanings in the poster for the film Cerita Lila using Roland Barthes's semiotic theory. The study employed a qualitative approach with semiotic analysis methods. The data consisted of one official poster for the film Cerita Lila, which was analyzed based on elements such as characters, color, lighting, composition, setting, typography, and visual expression. The results show that the poster not only represents the horror genre but also constructs a myth about women as figures trapped in trauma, suffering, and the supernatural world. The dominance of dark colors, the position of the main character, the presence of sleeping children, and the old house generate connotative meanings regarding psychological fear and family conflict. At the mythical level, the poster reproduces Indonesian beliefs regarding the association of old houses, long-haired women, and the supernatural world as symbols of the presence of unseen threats.

Keywords: Roland Barthes's Semiotics, Film Poster, Lila's Story, Denotation, Connotation.

INTRODUCTION

Film is a mass communication medium capable of conveying messages, cultural values, and social realities through a combination of visual, audio, and narrative elements. Besides serving as a medium for entertainment, film also serves as a means of representing various life phenomena that can influence how society views certain events or groups. Over time, film has evolved beyond its primary narrative through various promotional media, including posters. Film posters are the primary form of visual communication, introducing a film's identity to the public. Through the composition of images, colors, typography, character expressions, and visual

symbols, posters are able to establish the audience's initial perception of the film's theme, genre, conflict, and even its intended message.

According to Kress and Van Leeuwen (2021), each visual element in an image constitutes a sign system with representational, interpersonal, and compositional functions. Posters cannot be viewed solely as promotional media but also as visual texts containing social and cultural meaning. Rose (2022) argues that visual representation is never neutral, as it is always shaped by the values, ideologies, and cultural contexts that underlie it. Analyzing film posters is crucial for uncovering how meaning is constructed through the visual signs they present.

One approach widely used to examine meaning in visual media is semiotics. Semiotics is the study of signs and the process of meaning formation in social life. Among various semioticians, Roland Barthes is one expert who developed the concept of meaning into three levels: denotation, connotation, and myth. Barthes (1977) argued that signs not only have literal meaning but also carry cultural meanings that develop into ideologies within society. In his book "Image, Music, Text," Barthes states that "the photographic message is not only denoted but also connoted" (Barthes, 1977, p. 17). Every image always contains a deeper meaning than what is immediately apparent.

Barthes's concepts of denotation, connotation, and myth are highly relevant in analyzing film posters because visual media are constructed through various symbols that can be interpreted in layers. At the denotative level, the audience sees the object as it is, while at the connotative level, meaning is influenced by social, cultural, and emotional experiences. Connotations that are continuously reproduced will form myths, namely systems of meaning that are considered normal in society (Barthes, 1977). Semiotic analysis aims not only to understand what is depicted on a poster but also to uncover the ideological messages hidden behind these visual representations.

An interesting Indonesian film poster to study using a semiotic approach is the poster for *Cerita Lila*. The poster depicts a woman standing in the middle of an old room with a flat, depressed expression, flanked by two sleeping children. The dominance of dark colors, dim lighting, a dilapidated house, and a symmetrical visual composition create a tense atmosphere even before the audience sees the film. Visually, the poster utilizes various signs that direct the viewer to the psychological horror genre while simultaneously hinting at conflicts related to family, trauma, and supernatural threats.

The choice of black, gray, and dull green not only serves as an aesthetic element but also symbolizes sadness, uncertainty, and fear. The female character, placed at the center of the composition, suggests that the entire conflict centers on her. The presence of the two sleeping



children suggests both innocence and vulnerability to an unseen threat. The combination of all these elements demonstrates that the Lila Story poster is not simply a promotional medium, but rather a construction of meaning constructed through a system of visual signs.

In Indonesian culture, representations of long-haired women, old houses, and dark spaces have long been associated with mystical narratives and the supernatural. These representations continue to be reproduced in various horror films, forming a cultural myth about the relationship between women, the home, and supernatural powers. Hall (2021) defines representation as the process of producing meaning through language and signs that are understood based on cultural conventions. The visual signs in the poster do not stand alone but are always influenced by the collective experiences of the people who see them.

Much research has been conducted on the semiotics of film posters, but most have focused on popular films or posters that emphasize commercial and marketing elements. Studies specifically analyzing the poster for *Cerita Lila* using Roland Barthes's theory are still relatively limited. The poster presents various visual symbols that have the potential to reveal representations of women, family, psychological trauma, and cultural ideologies regarding the supernatural. This research is novel because it attempts to examine the meaning contained in the poster through Barthes's three levels of meaning: denotation, connotation, and myth.

Based on the description, this study aims to analyze the denotative, connotative, and mythical meanings in the poster for *Cerita Lila* using Roland Barthes's semiotic theory. The results are expected to contribute to the development of visual semiotic studies, particularly in understanding how film posters construct representations, ideologies, and cultural messages through the use of visual signs. Furthermore, this research is expected to serve as a reference for future researchers studying visual media, mass communication, film studies, and cultural studies using a semiotic approach.

METHOD

This research uses a descriptive qualitative approach with Roland Barthes's semiotic analysis method. The qualitative approach was chosen because the research aims to understand the meaning, symbols, and ideological messages contained in the poster for the film *Cerita Lila*, rather than measuring variables statistically. According to Creswell and Creswell (2023), qualitative research is an approach to exploring and understanding the meaning ascribed to social or humanitarian issues. Qualitative research is an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem (Creswell & Creswell, 2023, p. 41). The object of this research is the official poster for the film *Cerita Lila*,





which features a female character as the central visual against the backdrop of an old house and a dark atmosphere. Posters were chosen because they are a visual communication medium containing various signs, symbols, colors, compositions, and typography that can be analyzed using semiotic theory.

The data sources in this study consist of primary and secondary data. The primary data is the poster for the film *Cerita Lila*, while secondary data was obtained from books, scientific journals, articles, and previous research related to Roland Barthes's semiotics, visual analysis, and film and poster studies. Data collection techniques were conducted through visual observation and documentation. Researchers closely observed visual elements on posters, such as characters, facial expressions, gestures, color, lighting, background, composition, and typography. These elements were documented and categorized as signifiers for further analysis.

The data analysis technique used Roland Barthes' semiotic model, which consists of three stages. First, identifying denotative meaning, namely the literal meaning or what is directly visible on the poster. Second, analyzing connotative meaning, namely the meaning that arises based on the cultural context, emotions, and social experiences of the community. Third, identifying myths, namely the ideology or cultural beliefs reproduced through the visual signs on the poster (Barthes, 1977). To ensure data validity, the study employed theoretical triangulation by comparing the researcher's interpretations with Barthes's semiotic concepts and previous studies on visual representation in film posters. The resulting interpretations were not merely subjective but had a clear theoretical basis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The research results show that the poster for the film *Cerita Lila* contains various visual signs that construct meaning through Roland Barthes' three levels of interpretation: denotation, connotation, and myth. Analysis of visual elements, including the main character, facial expressions, gestures, color, lighting, setting, typography, and supporting objects, reveals that each element has a communicative function that is interconnected in forming the overall visual message. The poster serves not only as a promotional medium for the film but also as a representational medium that conveys social and cultural meaning through a system of visual signs.

The most dominant signifier is the figure of a woman placed directly in the center of the poster. At the denotative level, the woman is depicted wearing a long dress with her hair down and standing in a room. Connotatively, this position suggests that the female character is at the center of the conflict, experiencing mental stress, anxiety, and emotional burden. At the





mythical level, the representation of women points to a cultural construct that associates women with mystical experiences, suffering, and supernatural events that frequently appear in Indonesian horror film narratives.

Her long, black hair partially covering her face is one of the prominent visual signs in the poster. Denotatively, hair is merely part of the main character's physical appearance. However, connotatively, the long hair conveys a sense of mystery, sadness, and menace, enhancing the horror atmosphere. Mythically, long, black hair represents the image of a supernatural woman that has long been prevalent in Indonesian popular culture, becoming a recognizable symbol.

The old house depicted in the poster also conveys multiple meanings. Denotatively, it depicts a building with dull walls, wooden windows, and a dilapidated appearance. Connotatively, the house represents silence, isolation, and past trauma, which are part of the story's conflict. Mythologically, the old house is understood as a place believed to have a connection to the supernatural world or to be the location of spirits in various beliefs.

The presence of two sleeping children on the right and left sides of the main character also shapes the poster's meaning system. Denotatively, the two children are simply depicted lying in bed. However, connotatively, they symbolize innocence, vulnerability, and the need for protection from the woman in the center. On a mythical level, children are represented as vulnerable to supernatural disturbances, a common depiction in Indonesian horror films.

The analysis also shows that the use of dark colors is a very dominant visual element. Black, dark green, and gray are denotatively the dominant colors throughout the poster. On a connotative level, this color combination creates an atmosphere of fear, anxiety, sadness, and death. On a mythical level, dark colors reinforce the cultural construct that low-light spaces are synonymous with horror and the presence of supernatural forces.

The lighting coming from the left side of the room also carries its own meaning. Denotatively, the light comes from a window that illuminates a small portion of the room. On a connotative level, this lighting represents fading hope amidst a threatening situation. Meanwhile, on a mythical level, the contrast between light and darkness depicts the struggle between safety and danger, a common pattern in horror narratives.

The final marker analyzed is the typography of the title "Lila's Story." On a denotative level, this text serves as the film's identity. Connotatively, the use of the word "Story" suggests that the film presents a personal and emotional story. At the mythical level, the title builds the perception that the mystical experience experienced by the main character is a story that is close to the reality of life so that it can increase the audience's curiosity.





Picture 1. Poster Lila's Story

DISCUSSION

The research results show that the poster for the film *Cerita Lila* is constructed through a complex system of visual signs, capable of producing meanings that are not only denotative, but also connotative and mythological. From Roland Barthes' perspective, images never simply represent reality but rather become a medium that produces meaning based on cultural codes understood by society. Barthes (1977) states that the photographic message is not only denoted but also connoted (p. 17), meaning that an image always has both literal and cultural meaning. In the *Cerita Lila* poster, each visual element works simultaneously to establish the film's identity as a psychological horror film filled with representations of family, trauma, and supernatural threats.

The female character, placed right in the center of the poster, serves as the primary sign that directs the viewer's attention. Denotatively, the character is depicted as a woman wearing simple clothing with long, flowing hair and an unsmiling expression. However, connotatively, the character's placement at the center of the composition indicates that the entire conflict of the story centers on her. The body gesture, which appears to be hugging herself, suggests a psychological state of fear, anxiety, and a need for protection. Hall (2021) defines representation as the process of producing meaning through a system of signs shaped by cultural conventions. A flat facial expression and a covered body not only depict a character's emotional state but also construct the audience's perception that the main character is facing a serious conflict.

Danesi (2021) defines visual signs as working through the relationship between physical form and the cultural meanings inherent in the object. In the poster for "Lila's Story," long black

hair is not simply a physical characteristic of a woman but has become a cultural symbol synonymous with mysterious female figures in Indonesian horror films. This representation is the result of a social construction that is continuously reproduced through the media, causing audiences to automatically associate long hair with the supernatural world. Bennett (2021) argues that the development of modern semiology not only views signs as linguistic structures but also as processes that continuously shape meaning according to social and cultural contexts. The meaning of women in the poster does not stand alone but is influenced by society's collective experience with representations of women in popular culture.

The old house, the main setting in the poster, also demonstrates a multi-level system of meaning. At the denotative level, the house is depicted simply as a building with dull walls, minimal lighting, and a dilapidated appearance. Connotatively, the house symbolizes silence, isolation, and the trauma stored within the domestic space. According to Kress and Van Leeuwen (2021), visual layout is part of visual grammar, functioning to establish meaningful relationships between objects in an image. The placement of the house as the main setting reinforces the impression that the conflict originates not only from the main character but also from the space in which he lives.

At the mythical level, the old house represents a powerful symbol in Indonesian culture. Old houses are often associated with spirits or harboring dark histories, thus creating spaces that evoke fear. Barthes (1977) explains that myth is a second-order system of meaning that makes cultural constructions appear natural. The audience accepts the representation of the old house as a symbol of horror without questioning the origins of this meaning because it has become part of the cultural experience, continually repeated through mass media.

The presence of two sleeping children to the right and left of the main character also provides important meaning in constructing the visual narrative. Denotatively, the two children are simply depicted resting in bed. However, connotatively, they symbolize innocence, weakness, and a future that must be protected. The position of the woman between the two children demonstrates her role as both protector of the family and the one who bears all threats. According to Chandler (2022), signs acquire meaning through their relationship with other signs within a system. The visual connection between the woman and the two children conveys meaning regarding family responsibility and a mother's sacrifice in the face of threats.

Rosida et al. (2021) used Roland Barthes' semiotic approach to uncover the ideological meanings hidden behind visual representations. The poster for "Lila's Story" depicts children, not only indicating the presence of family members but also constructing the myth that children are the group most vulnerable to supernatural disturbances. This representation is often found

in Indonesian horror films, reinforcing audience expectations about the story's content.

Color is another important visual element. The dominance of black, gray, dark green, and dull brown creates a dark and tense atmosphere. Rose (2022) argues that color is part of a visual methodology that functions to build emotions and the audience's perception of an image. At the connotative level, dark colors represent fear, anxiety, sadness, and death. The lighting, which comes only from the window, suggests a hint of hope amidst the darkness. The contrast between light and dark builds a narrative about the struggle between safety and threat, a key characteristic of psychological horror films.

The typography of the title "Lila's Story" also functions as a sign system. The use of white in the title provides a strong contrast against the dark background, thus capturing the viewer's attention. The handwritten form of the writing creates a personal impression, as if the story being told is the real-life experience of the main character. Van Leeuwen (2023) argues that every visual element, including typography, has a social function in shaping meaning, making the text inseparable from the image. The film's identity is constructed not only through visual illustrations but also through the form and style of the title.

The research shows that the poster for *Cerita Lila* is a visual text constructed through the relationship between various mutually supporting signs. Parmentier (2020) argues that semiotics studies how signs work to shape communication and generate meaning in society. The meaning generated by the poster is not limited to visual representation alone but develops into an ideological system that reproduces cultural beliefs about women, family, old houses, children, and the supernatural world. Yakin et al. (2021) state that Barthes's theory allows researchers to uncover the hidden meanings behind signs through an analysis of denotation, connotation, and myth. The poster for *Cerita Lila* functions not only as a promotional medium for the film but also as a cultural representation that shapes public perception of the concept of psychological horror through the use of visual symbols that have become embedded in the audience's social experiences. This research shows that Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis is still very relevant in studying contemporary visual media because it is able to explain the relationship between signs, culture, and ideology comprehensively.

CONCLUSION

This study aims to uncover the meaning contained in the poster for the film *Cerita Lila* using Roland Barthes's semiotic approach, which encompasses three levels of meaning: denotation, connotation, and myth. The results show that the poster for *Cerita Lila* functions not only as a promotional medium but also as a visual communication medium that effectively



establishes the film's identity, conveys emotional messages, and represents cultural values through various visual signs.

At the denotative level, the poster depicts a woman standing in the middle of an old house with two sleeping children on either side. Visual elements such as a flat facial expression, long hair, the dominance of dark colors, dim lighting, and the dilapidated setting of the house create a literal depiction of a silent and tense atmosphere. At the connotative level, these elements represent psychological trauma, fear, protection of family, loneliness, and the threat emanating from unseen forces. The placement of the female character at the center of the composition indicates that she is the core of the conflict developed within the film's narrative.

At the mythical level, the poster reproduces various cultural beliefs deeply rooted in Indonesian society. The representation of long-haired women, old houses, dark rooms, and children as vulnerable figures reinforces the myth of the existence of the supernatural and its connection to family life. Through this process of meaning-making, the poster constructs an ideology that threats do not always originate externally, but can also be present in the domestic space, which should be the safest place.

This research demonstrates that Roland Barthes's semiotic theory can uncover layers of meaning hidden behind the visual elements of film posters. The resulting meaning derives not only from the visible objects but also from the relationship between the signs and the underlying social and cultural context. The poster for "Lila's Story" successfully constructs the image of a psychological horror film through the use of symbols, color, composition, lighting, and character expressions, all supporting each other to form a cohesive visual message.

This research is expected to contribute to the development of semiotics, visual communication, and film studies, particularly in understanding how film promotional media function not only as marketing tools but also as spaces for the production of meaning and cultural representation. Furthermore, this research can serve as a reference for future research examining film posters or other visual media using a semiotic approach or a broader cultural studies perspective.

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