



# Signs of the Hereafter: Semiotic Analysis of Afterlife Imagery in Indonesian Horror Movie Posters

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**Abstract.** This study undertakes a semiotic analysis of two posters with the same title, *Siksa Neraka*. Highlighting the crucial role of visual elements in how afterlife predictions are depicted in these Indonesian horror movie posters. By dissecting the signs and symbols in these posters, we can unravel the intricate meanings they communicate about the hereafter, drawing on the foundational work of Ferdinand de Saussure in semiotic theory. This study is a compelling exploration of the underlying cultural narratives and societal views regarding life after death as portrayed in Indonesian horror films by analyzing the textual and visual components. By comparing the afterlife themes depicted on the two posters, we can provide intriguing and significant insights into the development of horror aesthetics and the semiotic construction of dread and the paranormal in Indonesian popular culture, demonstrating the relevance of this research to the fields of semiotics, film studies, and cultural studies.

**Keywords:** Afterlife, Horror, Movie, Poster, Semiotics

## 1. Introduction

Nowadays, movies play a significant role in the lives of people all around the world [1]. Their popularity has peaked despite competition from other entertainment sources. A movie is made more general and “encodes a great deal of information about the piece within a single word” when it is categorized with a particular genre [2]. The function that a movie poster plays in the film industry is enormous. From movie theatre displays to newspaper ads to DVD covers, posters have always served as the initial impression that audiences get of a film [2]. Posters, as a crucial visual component, not only effectively promote the idea and story of a movie but also serve as a vital marketing tool for the movie [3]. They play a crucial role in promoting the movie for both the public and the production firms, sparking interest and drawing people into theatres [4].

In particular, promotional posters can reveal a lot about the broad public of potential customers they target, as well as the societal and cultural background of that public, when examined as speech and examined in terms of their semiotic structure [4]. A movie poster might have the title of the picture, the credits for the directors and

producers, the actors and actresses, and perhaps a catchphrase or quote. While these components should always be present on a movie poster, some designers may decide to arrange them in visually appealing ways [5]. Colours can be used to express particular messages and elicit particular emotions by using the concepts of colour theory and the development of colour palettes [6].

Most of the movie posters have their purposes, based on A. Christodoulou et al. (2015), in their article entitled *Social Signifies in the Movie Posters of Hollywood Movies Made for Children*, discuss about movie posters for children's animated films are not just promotional tools but also serve as carriers of ideology reflecting and shaping cultural norms and values [7]. Anggraheni (2023) on *Sewu Dino* Movie Poster the cultural norms and values also a religion that can be showed in the poster [8].

The poster for "*Siksa Neraka*," for example, employs various symbols of hell and torment, including depictions of fiery landscapes, tortured souls, and punitive demons. Each element in these posters is carefully chosen to evoke specific cultural and religious connotations. The fiery lava, skulls, and scenes of torture are not merely for shock value; they resonate with traditional Indonesian beliefs about the punishments that await sinners in the afterlife. The symbols in the posters mostly use references from religions that describe hell. One of the religions referenced in the movie and poster is Islam.

The Holy Quran describes hell as the home of evildoers and even shows its horrors, but it's important to remember that the Quran also describes paradise and hell as locations where people go through a never-ending process of progressing to a higher level [9]. The Holy Quran states, "The fire of God's wrath burned on account of sins which rise above the hearts," which means that the fire of hell is just the fire of sins [9] Thus, the sins that a person commits in this life prepare him for the hell he will find himself in the next, which is the source of the fire of hell.

The exploration of afterlife imagery in horror cinema offers a profound insight into cultural and religious conceptions of death and the hereafter. Indonesian horror films, in particular, provide a rich tapestry of symbols and motifs that reflect the nation's diverse cultural heritage and spiritual beliefs. This paper, titled "**Signs of the Hereafter: Semiotic Analysis of Afterlife Imagery in Indonesian Horror Movie Posters,**" aims to dissect and interpret the visual elements that communicate themes of the afterlife in Indonesian horror movie posters.

Horror films often utilize symbolism to evoke fear and convey more profound meanings. These symbols are particularly potent in the context of the afterlife, where they can reflect societal attitudes towards death, the soul, and moral retribution. According to Barthes' theory of semiotics, signs in media carry both denotative (literal) and connotative (cultural and emotional) meanings [10]. By analyzing the semiotics of horror movie posters, we can uncover the underlying messages and cultural narratives that these images convey.

Indonesian horror cinema has a long-standing tradition of integrating local folklore, myths, and religious beliefs into its narratives and visuals [8]. Films such as "*Pengabdian Setan*" (Satan's Slaves) and "*Siksa Neraka*" (Tortures of Hell) not only entertain but also reflect and reinforce traditional beliefs about the afterlife and spiritual retribution. The use of vivid and often grotesque imagery in these posters serves to evoke fear while simultaneously communicating moral and spiritual lessons.

This paper seeks to decode the complex layers of meaning embedded in Indonesian horror movie posters through a semiotic analysis of these visual elements. By examining both the denotative and connotative aspects of the imagery, we can better understand how these films reflect and shape cultural perceptions of the afterlife. This study not only contributes to the field of film studies but also offers a deeper appreciation of the cultural and spiritual dimensions of Indonesian horror cinema.

One of the reasons the writer chose the *Siksa Neraka* movie poster is because this movie was controversial after 2 neighbouring countries, Malaysia and Brunei, banned this film. The censorship rules are contained in the film censorship guidelines or Film Screening Guidelines issued by the Ministry of Home Affairs. The guidelines also refer to the *Akta Penapisan Filem 2002 (Akta 620)* law that applies in Malaysia [14]. The guidelines contain rules and restrictions regarding the content of films that appear in stories, visuals, scenes, dialogue, and themes. It was further mentioned that the movie also delves into Islamic teachings and the consequences of wrong actions. Thus, it is likely that it contributed to the banned.

## 2. Research Questions

1. How do Indonesian horror movie posters (*Siksa Neraka*) use visual and textual signs to depict afterlife imagery?
2. How do the connotations of visual elements in Indonesian horror movie posters (*Siksa Neraka*) influence the audience's perception of the afterlife?

## 3. Method

This study uses quantitative techniques to support a descriptive qualitative approach. Prior to doing a quantitative analysis of the data to find a typical pattern in the employment of semiotic modes to interpret the collected samples, the qualitative technique was employed to describe, analyze, and interpret the samples [11]. Based on this understanding, this study used the 2 *Siksa Neraka* posters as an object that was analyzed by classifying the signs that appear in the visual illustration of the poster and

interpreting the meaning arising from the sign. The movie poster is one of the primary data taken from <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt27657534/>.

Semiotic analysis was used as the method in this study. Semiotic analysis on the poster of *Siksa Neraka* is to search and find the signs that appear and, after that, interpret the meaning of the object. The Analysis Framework of the present study can be seen on the flow chart below:

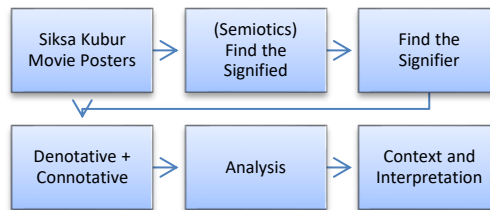


Fig.1. The Analysis Framework of the Present Study

### 3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design, utilizing Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic theory to analyze afterlife imagery in 2 Indonesian horror movie posters. The research focuses on interpreting the signs and symbols in the posters to uncover their denotative and connotative meanings.

### 3.2 Data Collection

The primary data for this study comprises selected Indonesian horror movie posters that prominently feature afterlife imagery. The selection criteria include:

- a. Relevance: Posters that depict themes related to the afterlife, such as hell, punishment, and spiritual retribution.
- b. Representation: A variety of posters from different films to ensure a comprehensive analysis of recurring themes and symbols.
- c. Cultural Significance: Posters from well-known Indonesian horror films are recognized for their cultural and religious impact.

Examples of Religious Movie posters include "*Siksa Neraka*" (Tortures of Hell), "*Pengabdian Setan*" (Satan's Slaves), *Siksa Kubur* (torment of the grave), *Makmum*, *Djiin*, *Qorin*, and others that fit the criteria.

### 3.3 Data Analysis

The semiotic analysis will follow Ferdinand de Saussure's framework of semiotics, which involves understanding the relationship between the signifier (the form of the sign) and the signified (the concept it represents) [12]. The analysis process includes the following steps:

### 1. Identification of Signs:

- a. Signifier: Identify the visual elements present in the posters, such as imagery, colours, text, and composition [13]. For example, recognizing the presence of lava, skulls, and tortured souls.
- b. Signified: Determine the concepts or ideas these visual elements represent within the cultural and religious context of Indonesian society.

### 2. Denotative Analysis:

Describe the literal meaning of the signs (signifier) in the posters [10]. For instance, a spiked club can be identified as a tool of punishment.

### 3. Connotative Analysis:

Explore the cultural and emotional meanings (signified) associated with the signs [14]. This involves interpreting the symbols within the context of Indonesian folklore, Islamic eschatology, and local cultural beliefs. For example, the image of people jumping off cliffs into hot lava can be analyzed as a representation of despair and eternal damnation.

### 4. System of Signs:

Analyze how the identified signs interact to create a system of meanings within each poster. Umberto Eco in Hoaxh (2022) pointed out that “the meaning of signals and signs is not necessarily determined by whether they refer to actual objects.” He also explains the existence of objects to which signals or signs may correspond is not a necessary condition for their signification [15]. This step helps to understand how the combination of different elements contributes to the overall message about the afterlife. Compare the systems of signs across different posters to identify common patterns and unique variations.

### 5. Contextual Interpretation:

Situate the findings within the broader context of Indonesian horror cinema and its role in reflecting and shaping societal attitudes toward the afterlife. Discuss how the posters contribute to the film's marketing strategy and audience reception.

## 4. Result and Discussion

*Siksa Neraka* movie poster was first released in 2023. Anggy Umbara directed the movie. The story starts with four brothers, Saleh, Fajar, Tyas, and Azizah, who have heard stories about heaven and hell since childhood. They were educated strictly by their father, a young ustaz who was well respected in the village. One night, on their way to the opposite village without their parents knowing, Saleh and his younger siblings were swept away by a strong river current and disappeared. Saleh then woke up in another realm, the hell that his father always talked about. A search is carried out in the world to find Saleh, Fajar, Tyas, and Azizah, whether alive or dead. One by one,

the secrets are revealed, and they find Saleh, Fajar, Tyas, and Azizah. Only Tyas survives from the bad incident. In hell, Saleh and the others also look for each other. The three children (Saleh, Fajar and Azizah) who died were immediately faced with hell. They get tortured according to the sins they committed while in the world [16]. As a religious person, no one knows what the hell looks like. Filmmakers flocked to visualize the shape of hell from various sources such as holy books, stories circulating in the community and stories from scholars. This movie is an adaptation of a comic book with the same title, "*Siksa Neraka*" by M.B. Rahimsyah [17].



Fig 2. *Siksa Neraka* Poster A



Fig 3. *Siksa Neraka* Poster B

This study used Denotative and Connotative Analysis. Through denotative analysis, we have identified common visual elements that directly depict the concept of the afterlife. The connotative analysis reveals deeper, culturally and psychologically resonant meanings behind the visual elements. The analysis is as follows:

**Table 1. The Analysis of Poster A and B**

Signified	Signifier	
	Denotation	Connotation
1. The Title	The title " <i>Siksa Neraka</i> " directly translates to "Hell's Torment" in English on posters A and B (Textual symbol)	The movie focuses on punishment afterlife. The difference is just the location of the title. The title in poster A is on the top, and poster B in the bottom of the poster, but they have the same aims to highlight the picture on the poster.

<b>2. Name of the Production House</b>	Dee Company on the top of the poster A and B (Textual symbol)	Present the name of the company that made the film. It means to promote the production house to the audience.
<b>3. One man has a larger size visually</b>	A man in chains and injured from torture on the poster A (Visual Symbol)	Implies severe moral consequences for sins. A man is one of the main characters in the movie.
<b>4. Many people with smaller size visual and demonic figures</b>	People drowned in the hot crater on poster A (Visual Symbol)	The imagery of people submerged in a hot crater symbolizes extreme suffering and torment, reflecting the notion of eternal punishment for sins.
<b>5. Big Iron</b>	A large, hot iron over one's back. on poster A (Visual Symbol)	A large hot iron can symbolize the heavy burden of one's sins. The pain from the iron represents the consequences of carrying the weight of one's immoral actions throughout the afterlife.
<b>6. River of Lava</b>	River of Lava as the background on the poster A (Visual Symbol)	Lava rivers are often associated with volcanic activity, which can be linked to the fiery landscapes traditionally depicted in hell. This connection reinforces the idea of eternal torment and suffering as a consequence of sins.
<b>7. Skull</b>	Skulls on poster A (visual symbol)	Skulls are universally recognized as symbols of death and mortality. They emphasize the finality of death and the consequences that await sinners in the afterlife.
<b>8. Place and year</b>	On Cinema 2023 on poster A dan the date 14 December 2023 on poster B (Textual Symbol)	The poster's information about the year and place will help the audience recognize when and where the movie will be shown.
<b>9. Color Scheme</b>	Predominately dark colors, reds and blacks. (Visual Symbol)	The colors convey a sense of fear, danger, and the supernatural.
<b>10. A Young girl in the center of the poster</b>	A girl in pain is being tortured with a spiked club until her tongue sticks out. (Visual Symbol)	The suffering of a young girl can elicit a deep, empathetic response, while the brutality of the torture creates a sense of repulsion, making the imagery more impactful.
<b>11. The weapon (spiked club)</b>	A spiked club that was smashed on a girl's cheek until her tongue stuck out. (Visual Symbol)	The use of a spiked club is a vivid symbol of extreme violence and brutality. This imagery suggests a level of cruelty that goes beyond mere punishment, highlighting the sadistic nature of the torment. A girl being subjected to such a violent act underscores her vulnerability and helplessness, evoking a sense of

		sympathy and horror in the audience.
<b>12. The names of the actors and actresses</b>	Information about the names of the actors and actresses. (Textual Symbol)	Names of famous actors and actresses can be a significant selling point, making the movie more appealing to potential viewers.
<b>13. People jumping off cliffs into the hot lava</b>	People jumping off cliffs into the hot lava on poster B (Visual Symbol)	The hot lava evokes traditional images of hell, where fire and brimstone are common elements used to depict the agonies that await the wicked.
<b>14. People hanging over the lava river with the chain.</b>	People hanging over the lava river with the chain on poster A (Visual Symbol)	The imagery of people hanging over a river of lava connotes extreme vulnerability and helplessness. It suggests that the individuals are at the mercy of external forces, unable to control their fate.

#### 4.1 Analyses the Relationship Between Signifiers and Signified on the Poster

The title “*Siksa Neraka*,” which clearly uses biblical terms, allows viewers of the promotional poster to deduce what the movie will be about easily. However, because the visual semiotics of the advertisement mainly emphasize the foreground images of the torments that occur in hell, which are considered too vulgar to depict the conditions in hell, which are still a mystery, the movie was rejected for screening in several Muslim-majority countries.

The image of hell and torment immediately evokes feelings of fear and suffering. The use of fire and dark tone enhances this sense of dread. The depiction of the young man and girl at the center of the poster being tortured illustrates the core of the movie's central theme, which is the depiction of torture in hell received by the characters in the movie.

The lava river serves as a powerful symbol of hell's eternal torment, destruction, and divine punishment. It leverages cultural and religious connotations to create a visual representation of ultimate suffering and moral consequence, aimed at instilling fear and a sense of inevitability about the afterlife's retribution for sins.

#### 4.2 Analyses of Contextual Interpretation

Based on the semiotic analysis, we found contextual Interpretations of the poster: cultural and religious symbolism, folklore and mythology, social and psychological impact, and cinematic and Marketing strategy, as follows:



### 1. Religious and Symbolism

*Siksa Neraka's* poster draws heavily from Islamic eschatology, which is deeply embedded in Indonesian culture. In Islamic teachings, hell (Jahannam) is described as a place of severe punishment and torment for sinners. The visual elements such as fire, lava, and instruments of torture reflect descriptions found in religious texts about the afterlife consequences for those who commit grave sins.

The use of these symbols is not only meant to invoke fear but also to remind viewers of the moral and spiritual repercussions of their actions, aligning with the didactic nature of many Indonesian horror films.

### 2. Folklore and Mythology

Indonesian folklore and traditional beliefs often incorporate stories of spirits, supernatural beings, and afterlife punishments [18]. The poster taps into these narratives by visualizing a hellish landscape where supernatural entities meet out of retribution. This blend of religious and local mythological elements creates a familiar yet terrifying image that resonates with the audience's cultural psyche.

### 3. Social and Psychological Impact

The imagery on the "*Siksa Neraka*" poster serves a didactic purpose, reinforcing social norms and ethical behavior. By portraying the extreme punishments that await sinners, the poster functions as a moral lesson, aiming to deter individuals from engaging in immoral acts. This is consistent with the role of horror cinema in many cultures, where fear is used as a tool to enforce societal values.

The graphic and visceral depictions of torture and suffering are designed to elicit a strong emotional response from the viewer. The use of intense imagery, such as people jumping into lava or being tortured with spiked clubs, aims to create a sense of dread and horror, making the moral message more impactful. This psychological approach leverages fear to instill a deeper understanding of the consequences depicted.

### 4. Cinematic and Marketing Strategy

The striking and gruesome visuals on the poster are meant to attract the audience's attention [19]. Horror movie posters often use shocking imagery to stand out and pique curiosity, drawing viewers into the cinema. The extreme depictions of hell and torment in the "*Siksa Neraka*" poster are designed to appeal to fans of the horror genre who seek thrilling and fear-inducing content.

The poster provides a visual summary of the themes and tone of the movie [3]. By showcasing the elements of hell and punishment, the poster sets the expectation for the type of horror the audience will experience. This alignment between the poster and the film content ensures that viewers are

drawn in by the promise of intense and terrifying scenes that the movie delivers.

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, there are 14 semiotics signs on *Siksa Neraka* movie posters. To answer the 1<sup>st</sup> research question about how Indonesian horror movie posters (*Siksa Neraka*) use visual and textual signs to depict afterlife imagery, the semiotic analysis of afterlife imagery in Indonesian horror movie posters, especially in 2 posters of *Siksa Neraka* Movie, reveals a complex interplay between denotation and connotation. On a denotative level, the posters straightforwardly depict hell and its associated torments and most of them are based on the Holy Quran. However, on a connotative level, they resonate deeply with cultural, religious, and psychological dimensions, reinforcing societal beliefs and fears about the afterlife.

To answer the 2<sup>nd</sup> research question about how the connotations of visual elements in Indonesian horror movie posters influence the audience's perception of the afterlife, these posters do not merely serve to promote the movie; they also function as cultural artefacts that reflect and reinforce the community's values and anxieties. The effective use of semiotic elements ensures that the imagery of the afterlife remains a powerful and evocative motif in Indonesian horror cinema, connecting with audiences on multiple levels and perpetuating traditional narratives about morality, sin, and retribution. 2 *Siksa Neraka* movie posters are the provocative one that in the beginning of 2024 the poster shows a picture of the movie poster accompanied by the words "Banned" across and quite large in the center of the poster. "For those who are waiting, *Siksa Neraka* is banned in Malaysia and Brunei," said the film's distributor Antenna Entertainments [17]. The upload also drew various reactions from Malaysian netizens. According to several comments from netizens in Malaysia, the reason it was banned from airing was that it was allegedly inappropriate to act out the movie version of the heaven and hell scene.

By understanding these layers of meaning, we gain insight into how horror movie posters in Indonesia utilize semiotic principles to communicate profound cultural and religious messages about the afterlife, thereby maintaining their relevance and impact in contemporary society. The "*Siksa Neraka*" poster utilizes powerful religious, cultural, and psychological imagery to convey themes of moral retribution and eternal punishment. Drawing on familiar symbols from Islamic eschatology and Indonesian folklore creates a resonant and fearsome depiction of hell that serves both as a moral lesson and a cinematic lure. The poster's ability to evoke strong emotional responses and curiosity ensures its effectiveness in attracting and impacting its audience.

In contrast to the global paradigms of horror aesthetics, the *Siksa Neraka* posters are particularly notable for their distinctive amalgamation of indigenous cultural and

religious iconography, which imparts a singular resonance. While global horror typically utilizes universally discernible symbols of terror such as sombre hues, unsettling figures, or paranormal phenomena on the Indonesian posters are significantly influenced by Islamic eschatological themes and Indigenous folklore, rendering the imagery more culturally pertinent and spiritually resonant for local viewers.

The visual rhetoric employed in these posters, characterized by representations of inferno, suffering, and moral retribution, stands in stark opposition to the predominantly psychological or supernatural anxieties typically encountered in Western horror [20]. Rather than concentrating on abstract anxieties such as the unknown or inner turmoil, these posters provide concrete manifestations of punishment and divine justice, firmly anchored in deeply ingrained religious convictions. This deliberate incorporation of explicit moral repercussions renders the posters simultaneously shocking and didactic, fulfilling a dual function of eliciting fear while reinforcing societal norms regarding sin and morality.

In summary, whereas global horror aesthetics may prioritize fear as an end, the *Siksa Neraka* posters employ fear as a moral apparatus intimately intertwined with cultural and religious narratives, thereby making them profoundly resonant within their specific socio-cultural context. This divergence in visual expression not only highlights regional artistic predilections but also underscores the cultural role of horror within Indonesian society.

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