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## Visual Narrative in a Single Frame: A Semiotic Analysis of the *Makmum* (2019) Film Poster as a Communication of Horror Aesthetics

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### Abstract

The Indonesian horror film *Makmum* (2019) gained critical and popular attention for its distinctive approach to horror, emphasizing psychological tension and spiritual unease over conventional jump scares. As part of its visual communication strategy, the film's official poster plays a crucial role in conveying its aesthetic and thematic essence. This study applies Roland Barthes' semiotic theory of denotation, connotation, and myth to analyze how the poster functions as a visual narrative within a single frame, encapsulating the film's horror aesthetics. Using a qualitative semiotic method, the poster is examined through its core visual elements: composition, lighting, typography, and symbolism. The findings reveal that the poster's minimalist design and stark contrast lighting effectively evoke the film's oppressive atmosphere. The central composition, featuring a veiled woman in prayer and a shadowy figure behind her, mirrors the *mise-en-scène* of spiritual vulnerability and unseen terror. Religious symbols such as the *rukun* are recontextualized, shifting their connotative meaning from sanctity to threat, thereby constructing a myth of spiritual disturbance rooted in local cultural beliefs. This visual strategy not only reflects the film's narrative but also prepares the audience psychologically for its thematic depth. The poster becomes more than promotional material; it acts as a semiotic gateway into the film's emotional and cultural landscape. Thus, the graphic design serves as an extension of the cinematic experience, reinforcing the psychological and spiritual horror embedded in the story.

**Keywords:** film poster, horror aesthetics, semiotics, spiritual symbolism, visual narrative

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## Introduction

Film poster is one of the most important visual communication media in the film industry because it serves not only as a promotional tool but also as a medium that introduces narrative themes, genre identity, and emotional expectations to potential audiences. According to Kernan (2004), film posters function as visual gateways that shape audience perceptions before they encounter the cinematic text itself. Through visual elements such as composition, color, typography, and imagery, posters communicate symbolic meanings that contribute to audience interpretation and anticipation.

Previous studies have examined film posters from various perspectives. Wibowo (2020) explored visual symbolism in Indonesian horror film posters and found that color contrast and character positioning significantly influence audience perception of fear. Meanwhile, Sunarto (2019) argued that contemporary Indonesian horror films increasingly employ cultural and religious symbols as part of their visual identity. However, these studies mainly focus on general horror imagery and have not specifically investigated how religious symbols are transformed into horror signifiers through semiotic processes.

This gap becomes particularly relevant in the case of *Makmum* (2019), a film whose horror narrative is rooted in religious practices familiar to Indonesian audiences. Unlike conventional horror films that rely on ghosts or physical threats, *Makmum* utilizes prayer rituals and spiritual vulnerability as central narrative devices. Therefore, examining how these religious symbols are visually constructed within the official poster can contribute to a deeper understanding of visual communication strategies in Indonesian religious-horror cinema.

The Indonesian horror film *Makmum* (2019), directed by Hadrah Daeng Ratu, gained significant public attention for its distinctive approach to horror, which diverges from the conventions of mainstream commercial cinema. Rather than relying heavily on visual shock effects or excessive jump scares, the film builds tension through psychological atmosphere and spiritual disturbance elements closely tied to the religious experiences of Indonesian audiences. The narrative of the unseen *makmum* who disrupts prayer is rooted in local cultural beliefs, providing thematic depth and strong emotional resonance.

Amid the film's wide reception, one crucial factor shaping audience perception is its official poster, which functions as a medium of visual communication. A poster serves not only as promotional material but also as an aesthetic and narrative representation that condenses the essence of the story into a single visual frame (Barnwell, 2004). In the case of *Makmum*, the poster depicts a woman in prayer with a dark shadow looming behind her, a composition that immediately activates visual codes of spiritual vulnerability, unseen danger, and the religious-horror atmosphere that defines the film.

The analysis of film posters as visual texts can be conducted through Roland Barthes' semiotic framework, which maps meaning across three levels: denotation, connotation, and myth (Barthes, 1977). This approach is particularly relevant for examining how visual elements composition, lighting, typography, and symbolism, construct meanings that shape the film's atmosphere of horror and its cultural messages (Barthes, 1977). Given that the *Makmum* poster features religious symbols such as the *mukena*, the prayer space, and the female figure, it is essential to understand how these signs are recontextualized from sanctity into threat, thereby creating a new myth of spiritual disturbance within religious practice. As a medium of visual communication, the film poster operates beyond promotion; it embodies aesthetic representation and thematic narrative. Within the context of Indonesian horror cinema,

*Makmum* stands out for addressing spiritual disturbance rooted in everyday religious practice. Its official poster becomes a critical entry point for understanding how horror is constructed through visual symbolism. Barthes' semiotic framework provides a relevant lens for uncovering these layers of meaning, distinguishing between literal representation (denotation), implicit interpretation (connotation), and broader cultural narratives (myth).

The purpose of this study is to analyze the visual elements of the *Makmum* poster through Barthes' semiotic theory, to identify the strategies of horror aesthetic communication employed, and to explain how religious symbols are recontextualized into representations of threat. Accordingly, this research focuses on the semiotic analysis of the *Makmum* film poster to reveal how visual strategies function as a one-frame visual narrative that constructs psychological and spiritual horror.

## Method

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach using Roland Barthes' semiotic framework. The primary data consisted of the official *Makmum* (2019) film poster obtained from promotional materials released by Dee Company and Blue Water Films. The poster was selected purposively because it represents the main visual identity of the film and contains dominant religious-horror imagery relevant to the research objectives.

The unit of analysis comprised four visual elements: (1) composition, including focal point, balance, and framing; (2) color and lighting; (3) typography; and (4) symbolic representations. Data collection was conducted through documentation and visual observation techniques.

Data analysis followed Barthes' three levels of signification. First, denotative analysis identified visible and literal visual elements appearing in the poster. Second, connotative analysis interpreted the symbolic and emotional meanings associated with these visual elements based on theories of visual communication, horror aesthetics, and color psychology. Third, myth analysis examined how these connotations connect with broader cultural beliefs and religious narratives within Indonesian society.

To enhance analytical validity, interpretations were compared with previous studies on horror film posters, visual semiotics, religious symbolism, and Indonesian horror cinema. This triangulation of theories was employed to minimize subjective interpretation and strengthen the credibility of findings. *Makmum* is an Indonesian horror film adapted from an award-winning short film by Riza Pahlevi and released on August 15, 2019. It was directed by Hadrah Daeng Ratu, produced by Dheeraj Kalwani, and made by Blue Water Films and Dee Company. The poster was chosen because it displays dominant visual elements in constructing the image of a horror film based on religious experience. The focus of the study includes: visual elements (color, lighting, illustration, character expression, shadow effects), typographic elements (typeface, size, color, hierarchy), visual composition (rule of thirds, focal point, balance, depth of field), as well as symbolic meaning and visual messages contained in the poster. The research object is the official *Makmum* (2019) film poster published by the production house as the main promotional material. The poster was selected because it visually represents the film's theme and serves as the most direct medium of horror aesthetics communicated to the audience before watching the film.

The research stages were carried out through several systematic steps. First, visual data collection was conducted by identifying the main elements in the poster, including composition, lighting, typography, and symbolism. Second, denotative analysis was performed by describing

visual elements literally, such as character positions, dominant colors, and typographic forms. Third, connotative analysis was carried out by interpreting the implicit meanings of visual elements, for example, how dark lighting conveys a sense of threat or how the prayer garment, usually associated with purity, becomes a symbol of vulnerability. Fourth, myth analysis was conducted by connecting connotative results with broader cultural narratives, such as myths of spiritual disturbances in Indonesian religious practices. The subject of this research is the meaning and visual messages contained in the *Makmum* film poster, derived from the researcher's interpretation through the theoretical framework of aesthetics, visual semiotics, color theory, and graphic design principles. In addition, supporting subjects include brief interviews with film viewers and reference data from film critics or media articles discussing horror-religious imagery in local films. However, these are optional, as the main analysis is based on the visual artifact of the poster.

The *Makmum* (2019) poster demonstrates how Indonesian religious-horror cinema transforms familiar religious symbols into sources of psychological tension. Through the juxtaposition of a white *mukena*, low-key lighting, and the presence of a shadow figure positioned as an unseen follower during prayer, the poster recontextualizes sacred visual signs into representations of spiritual threat. At the mythological level, the poster activates collective cultural beliefs regarding supernatural disturbances during worship, thereby constructing a uniquely Indonesian form of horror rooted in religious experience rather than physical violence.

## Results

The official poster of *Makmum* (2019) presents a religious horror scene featuring a woman wearing a white *mukena* while performing prayer. She is positioned at the center of the composition, with a dark shadowy figure standing directly behind her. The background is dominated by black, dark blue, and grayish-brown tones, while limited lighting illuminates only part of the protagonist's face and body. Additional visual elements, including the mosque floor, textured walls, and the film title placed at the bottom of the poster, establish the setting of a nighttime worship environment.

The visual analysis reveals that the poster emphasizes a strong contrast between the white *mukena* and the surrounding dark background. The centralized composition directs attention to the praying woman and the shadow behind her, while the extensive use of negative space creates a sense of isolation. Low-key lighting enhances the depth of the composition by highlighting the central figure and leaving much of the surrounding environment in darkness. The title MAKMUM is displayed in large uppercase serif letters with a faded mist-like texture, remaining clearly visible against the dark background while preserving the dominance of the central visual image.

Semiotically, the denotative level shows a woman praying in a dimly lit room with a shadowy figure positioned behind her. At the connotative level, the visual opposition between light and darkness, the white *mukena* and the black shadow, and the juxtaposition of worship with an unseen presence collectively create an atmosphere of mystery and tension. At the mythic level, the poster combines religious imagery with supernatural elements, presenting a recurring visual motif in which a praying individual is accompanied by a shadowy figure during worship.

Overall, the findings indicate that the poster relies on a limited number of visual elements: color, composition, lighting, typography, and symbolic imagery, to construct the

visual identity of the film. The integration of these elements consistently presents the themes of religious practice, isolation, and supernatural presence within a single visual composition.

## Discussion

### *Visual Description of the Makmum Film Poster*

The official poster of *Makmum* (2019) depicts a woman performing a prayer against a dark background, while the shadow of a supernatural figure appears standing directly behind her. The dominant colors are black, dark blue, and grayish brown, with the main light source coming from the left side, illuminating part of the protagonist's face and body. The typography of the title "MAKMUM" uses capital serif letters in a faded white tone with a mist effect, creating a mysterious and religious impression.

**Figure 1.** *Makmum* Movie Poster



Other visual elements such as the mosque floor, the white *mukena* (prayer garment), and the dark wall textures contribute to constructing the context of a nighttime worship scene. The visual composition is centered on the contrast between the praying figure and the shadow of the unknown entity, thereby creating a duality between the sacred space and the supernatural threat.

The white *mukena* displayed in the poster functions not merely as religious attire but also as a culturally recognized signifier of purity and devotion. Hall (1997) argues that visual representations derive meaning from shared cultural codes. Within Indonesian Muslim culture, the *mukena* signifies spiritual cleanliness and submission to God. Consequently, the juxtaposition of the white *mukena* against the dark shadow behind the praying woman creates a symbolic opposition between sacredness and spiritual threat.

Similarly, the use of low-key lighting aligns with conventions commonly found in horror visual culture. According to Bordwell and Thompson (2019), low-key lighting is frequently employed in horror cinema to generate ambiguity, conceal information, and evoke psychological unease. The poster adopts this strategy by obscuring the shadow figure,

encouraging viewers to imagine an unseen presence and thereby intensifying fear.

Furthermore, the positioning of the shadow directly behind the praying figure may be interpreted through Barthes' concept of myth. Rather than functioning solely as a visual element, the shadow activates collective cultural beliefs regarding supernatural disturbances during acts of worship. This interpretation is consistent with studies by Sunarto (2019), which demonstrate that Indonesian horror media often draw upon religious narratives and local spiritual beliefs to establish emotional resonance with audiences.

### ***Visual Aesthetic Analysis***

#### ***Color and Atmosphere***

Dark colors dominate the poster, creating a tense atmosphere typical of horror films. The use of black and dark blue reinforces the spiritual-spooky theme while directing the viewer's gaze toward the main subject. According to Hall (1997), religious symbols in visual representation are often constructed as signifiers of cultural identity. In the context of Indonesian muslim society, the *mukena* (muslim women's prayer garment) is conventionally associated with purity, devotion, and the sacred act of worship. Therefore, the contrast between the white *mukena* and the surrounding dark shadows in the *Makmum's* poster creates a symbolic tension between holiness and spiritual threat. This visual opposition emphasizes the disruption of a sacred religious space by a supernatural presence. From the perspective of Beardsley's (1982) aesthetic theory, the elements of unity and intensity are achieved through the harmonious integration of dark color palette, restrained lighting, and the religious horror theme conveyed by the poster.

#### ***Composition and Visual Focus***

The composition applies the principle of central focus: the subject (a woman praying) is placed in the center of the poster, while the shadow of the supernatural figure looms directly behind her. The arrangement immediately draws the viewer's attention to the relationship between the worshipper and the unseen entity, establishing the central conflict of the narrative. The use of low-key lighting creates depth and builds visual tension, consistent with Dondis' (1973) design theory, which states that high contrast can evoke strong emotional reactions. The balanced yet unsettling composition reinforces the vulnerability, as the figure appears isolated despite occupying the visual center. Furthermore, the extensive use of negative space on the right and left emphasizes the silence and solitude of nighttime prayer, while also providing room for the "unseen presence." This spatial arrangement encourages viewers to imagine what lies beyond the visible frame, thereby intensifying suspense and psychological unease.

#### ***a. Typography***

The title "*MAKMUM*" is presented in large, uppercase serif letters, conveying a formal, solemn, and serious impression that aligns with the film's religious theme. The subtle thin mist texture applied to the letters strengthens the supernatural atmosphere. The placement of the typography at the bottom maintains visual focus on the main image, in line with the principles of visual hierarchy in film poster design.

### ***Semiotic Analysis***

#### **a. Denotative Meaning**

Denotatively, the poster depicts a woman performing a prayer, with the shadow of another figure appearing behind her. The dark colors and narrow lighting indicate a nighttime setting or a dimly lit space.

#### b. Connotative Meaning

The connotative meaning provides emotional and symbolic interpretation:

- 1) The shadow represents disturbance during worship, in line with the film's theme.
- 2) The contrast between the white *rukun* and the dark background signifies the struggle between goodness and darkness.
- 3) The posture of the character in *sujud* (prostration) or *rukuk* (bowing) symbolizes human vulnerability before unseen forces.
- 4) The dark space emphasizes the impression that even places of worship can become sites of spiritual tension.

These connotations align with Barthes' (1977) theory, which states that visual images contain a second layer of meaning rooted in emotions, culture, and collective experience.

#### c. *Myth Constructed*

The myth in the *Makmum* poster is rooted in the common experience of Indonesian society, which believes that nighttime worship can bring both spiritual experiences and supernatural disturbances. The poster constructs the narrative that:

- 1) "*Makmum*" is an entity that follows behind someone during prayer.
- 2) Sacred spaces are not entirely safe from the presence of spirits.
- 3) Spiritual and supernatural forces can coexist within religious spaces.

This myth resonates with Indonesian religious culture, which recognizes the concept of disturbances during prayer, such as beings standing behind or the presence of an unseen *Makmum*

#### d. Interpretation of Visual Communication Messages

From the results of aesthetic and semiotic analysis, the *Makmum* poster conveys several key messages:

- 1) **Spiritual Tension:** The poster emphasizes that horror in the film is not only physical but also spiritual—occurring at the most sacred moment: prayer.
- 2) **Human Vulnerability:** The praying woman symbolizes the vulnerable position of humans when engaged in spiritual connection with God.
- 3) **Presence of the Unseen Entity:** The shadow behind her represents the collective fear of spirits often associated with places of worship.
- 4) **Disturbed Sanctity:** The white *rukun*, symbolizing purity and tranquility, is tainted by the presence of the dark shadow. The poster implicitly raises a philosophical question: Is a place of worship truly free from supernatural disturbances?
- 5) **Aesthetic Relevance to Film Theme:** The poster functions not only as promotional media but also as an aesthetic representation of the film's central conflict:
  - a) horror within religious spaces,
  - b) interaction between spirits and humans during worship,
  - c) trauma and spiritual disturbance.

With its intense visual elements, the poster successfully builds the expectation that the film offers a combination of psychological, religious, and culturally rooted horror. The visual

strategy strengthens horror aesthetics by emphasizing psychological and spiritual aspects rather than conventional jump scares. This aligns with the trend in contemporary Indonesian horror films that prioritize thematic depth and cultural relevance.

The *Makmum* poster thus serves not only as promotional material but also as a semiotic gateway preparing audiences for a deeper cinematic experience. The graphic design reinforces the identity of Indonesian horror cinema, which uniquely combines religious symbolism with psychological terror.

Furthermore, the analysis shows that the poster communicates horror aesthetics through a minimalist strategy. Simple yet meaningful visual elements evoke fear and anxiety without relying on explicit or vulgar imagery. This demonstrates that the strength of visual communication lies in the ability of symbolism and connotation to construct emotional narratives. Therefore, the *Makmum* poster can be regarded as an effective representation of horror aesthetics, one that is not only frightening but also reflective of Indonesian cultural and spiritual values.

The official poster of *Makmum* (2019) presents a powerful visual representation of religious horror through a carefully constructed composition, lighting arrangement, and symbolic imagery. At the denotative level, the poster depicts a woman wearing a white *mukena* standing in the center of a dimly lit prayer room, while a dark shadowy figure appears directly behind her. The dominant use of black, gray, and dark brown colors, combined with low-key lighting, immediately establishes a tense and unsettling atmosphere. The title MAKMUM is displayed prominently at the bottom in bold uppercase typography, reinforcing the film's identity and horror genre. These visual elements work together to introduce the audience to the film's central theme before any narrative information is revealed.

At the connotative level, the white *mukena* functions as more than a religious garment; it symbolizes purity, devotion, and spiritual submission within Indonesian Muslim culture. According to Hall's theory of representation (1997), visual symbols derive meaning from shared cultural understandings. In this context, the juxtaposition of the pure white *mukena* against the dark and threatening figure behind the protagonist creates a symbolic opposition between sacredness and supernatural danger. This contrast transforms a familiar religious symbol into a sign of vulnerability, suggesting that spiritual devotion does not necessarily protect individuals from unseen disturbances. As a result, the poster generates psychological tension through the collision of purity and fear.

The shadowy figure positioned directly behind the praying woman serves as the poster's most significant horror signifier. Rather than explicitly displaying a frightening creature, the poster relies on ambiguity and suggestion to evoke fear. Barthes (1977) argues that connotative meanings emerge from cultural associations and emotional responses attached to visual signs. The dark figure can therefore be interpreted as a representation of supernatural interference, spiritual anxiety, or the presence of an unseen entity. Its placement behind the protagonist is particularly meaningful because it directly references the concept of a *makmum* in Islamic prayer, creating a disturbing inversion in which a figure normally associated with worship becomes a source of terror. This visual strategy encourages viewers to engage with the poster through imagination rather than explicit horror imagery.

The use of low-key lighting and centralized composition further strengthens the poster's psychological impact. Bordwell and Thompson (2019) explain that low-key lighting is commonly employed in horror cinema to conceal information and create uncertainty. In the *Makmum* poster, the limited illumination highlights the protagonist while leaving much of the surrounding environment in darkness. This selective visibility creates suspense and directs the audience's attention toward the relationship between the woman and the shadow behind her. Moreover, the central composition establishes the protagonist as the focal point of the visual narrative, while the vertical alignment of the two figures symbolizes the coexistence of the human and supernatural realms. The depth of the interior space also contributes to a sense of isolation and vulnerability, reinforcing the atmosphere of spiritual unease.

At the mythological level, the poster reflects broader cultural beliefs surrounding supernatural disturbances during worship within Indonesian society. Barthes describes myth as a second-order system of meaning that naturalizes cultural ideologies and collective beliefs. The *Makmum* poster activates a familiar cultural narrative in which unseen beings may accompany or disrupt individuals during prayer. By visually connecting religious practice with supernatural presence, the poster constructs a uniquely Indonesian form of horror rooted in spiritual experience rather than physical violence. Consequently, the poster functions not only as promotional material but also as a semiotic text that communicates cultural anxieties, religious symbolism, and psychological fear. Through its visual language, *Makmum* successfully transforms everyday religious imagery into an effective representation of spiritual horror.

## Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the *Makmum* (2019) film poster serves as a strategic medium of visual communication that not only promotes the film but also represents the core narrative and the spiritual-horror atmosphere that forms its main theme. Through visual aesthetic analysis and Roland Barthes' semiotic approach, it was found that the poster employs centralized composition, high-contrast lighting, dark colors, and religious symbols to construct a sense of psychological tension.

Denotatively, the poster depicts a woman praying with a shadowy figure behind her. Connotatively, these elements reflect spiritual vulnerability, disturbance in worship, and the tense atmosphere typical of religious horror films. At the myth level, the poster reinforces cultural beliefs about the presence of supernatural beings that disturb humans during worship—a concept closely tied to the spiritual experiences of Indonesian society.

The findings reveal that the poster's visual communication design fulfills representational functions (presenting a visual horror narrative), interactive functions (capturing attention and evoking audience emotions), and compositional functions (arranging visual elements harmoniously). Thus, the *Makmum* poster serves as an effective visual narrative, bridging cinematic experience with cultural perceptions of spiritual horror. It builds the expectation that the film is not only visually frightening but also touches the psychological and religious dimensions of its viewers.

### **Author Contribution Statement**

**Muhamad Ilham:** Research Design; Methodology; Project Administration; Writing - Original Draft; Writing - Review & Editing. **Mahendradewa Suminto:** Methodology; Writing - Review & Editing; Validation. **Mohammad Rezaie:** Writing - Review & Editing.

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