Exploring Shamanic and Blackmagic Practices in the Movie Santet Segoro Pitu

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Abstract: This report presents a semiotic analysis of the Indonesian horror film "Santet Segoro Pitu" using Roland Barthes' framework, which includes denotation, connotation, and myth. This study adopts a descriptive-qualitative method, with the film "Santet Segoro Pitu" as the main object. The primary research instrument is Roland Barthes' semiotic approach, which is used to uncover the meaning of signs in the film through three levels of signification: denotation, connotation, and myth. Data collection techniques include watching the entire film on Netflix, using screenshots as documentation, conducting in-depth observations of symbols, and applying triangulation methods. By examining seven key symbols—the black magic "Santet Segoro Pitu," the mysterious package, the seven seas, the shaman, the Suanggi ghost, the Ruwatan ritual, the offerings, and the antagonist shaman's altar—this study aims to uncover the deeper cultural, social, and ideological messages embedded in the film. This analysis demonstrates how the film leverages traditional Indonesian beliefs about shamans and black magic to construct a narrative that reflects societal anxieties, the enduring power of local folklore, and the tension between traditional and modern practices.
Keywords: *Symbol; semiotic; Roland Barthes*

1.   INTRODUCTION

Semiotics is a field that studies the meaning and interpretation of signs that have messages for people (Jadou & Ghabra, 2021). It refers to a science that includes theories and methods for studying everything that produces signs (Sebeok, 2001). One important element in semiotics is the use of symbolism. Metaphors, symbols, myths, stories, and legends are important means of creating meaning: they shape our imagination and help us represent worlds and experiences that we cannot understand (Fotaki et al., 2020). These symbols are used to convey deeper meanings and messages that are not always directly visible.

Semiotics studies signs as something that creates meaning (Aminu, 2021) and is often used to interpret cultural phenomena or literary works (Dirgantara, 2024), making it suitable for uncovering hidden messages in films. Films convey stories and messages through various audiovisual tools. Film, as an audio-visual mode offers a unique opportunity to overcome the sophistication and linguistic difficulties often associated with canonical works (Kortas, 2023). In films, signs such as dialog, images, music, actors' movements, and mise-en-scène elements such as lighting and costumes can provide meaning and information to the audience. To reveal the obvious and obscure ideologies and messages of films, semiotic analysis can be employed. In addition to expressing the ideology contained in the film, symbols such as dialog, images, music, actors' movements, and mise-en-scène elements such as lighting and costumes are very important.

Symbolism in film is the way writers use objects, characters, colors, or actions to convey deeper ideas and emotions. For example, red roses usually symbolize love, while black cats are often considered symbols of misfortune. Symbolic signs are signs whose meanings have been established by convention and custom; all words are symbols in the Peircean sense, such as red and green lights at intersections (Balme, 2008). Roland Barthes divides the levels of sign meaning into two main parts: with this symbol, denotative meaning (general meaning) as the first level and connotation (derived meaning) as the second level (Adiansyah et al., 2023). Lubis and Oisina (2022) also mention that symbols are not made as ordinary symbols denotative symbols, but connotative symbols discursive symbols. Barthes also sees another aspect of labeling, namely the "myth" that marks a society. Myth is a form of ideology that is created in everyday society (Fitriani and Wiharja, 2023). The theory of myth was developed by Barthes to criticize the ideology of mass culture or media culture (Rahayu, 2020). With these symbols, the audience can feel a deeper meaning in the story, prompting them to think and interpret the message. Symbolism also makes the story feel more universal, as many of the symbols can be understood by people from different cultures and backgrounds. This helps the audience connect with the film on a more emotional level.

Roland Barthes, a French philosopher, is the most synonymous semiotic figure in the world of semiotics. He is a philosopher, literary critic, structuralist, and semiologist (Siregar, 2022). Roland Barthes was the first person to apply the idea of semiotics that developed from linguistics to visual images, such as food advertisements, photography, and films. A number of previous studies have examined semiotics in films using Roland Barthes' theory. For instance, Ayu Famila Putri et al., (2023) analyzed semiotics in the *Aladdin* film using Roland Barthes' theory. The results of this study stated that Roland Barthes' semiotics can be used to explain the semiotic meaning contained in it and found 38 types and meanings of Roland Barthes' semiotics consisting of 21 types and meanings of denotation, 13 types and meanings of connotation and 4 types and meanings of myth. The results of this study also show that the *Aladdin* film has many semiotic signs that can be analyzed using Roland Barthes' theory. In addition, Devi, TSE, and Wahyuningsih (2023) discuss the meaning of koto in the anime film *Kono Oto Tomare!* using Roland Barthes' semiotic approach. *Kono Oto Tomare!* tells the story of the struggle of the koto club students at Tokise High School in maintaining their club from being disbanded by the vice principal. The results of this study illustrate the importance of cooperation and trust in achieving goals. One of the main scenes analyzed in the film is when Hiro feels jealous of the close relationship of the club members, Hiro tries to destroy the trust between them, emphasizing the importance of honesty and openness in friendship.

According to the findings of Shafira and Rui (2023), the film *Wish Dragon* successfully represents Chinese culture using semiotic analysis based on Roland Barthes' theory. The study found several elements of Chinese culture such as large gate in ancient Chinese style (*牌坊páifāng)*, tight Chinese traditional houses, and dragons believed to be mythological creatures. The study not only reveals the denotative and connotative meanings of these visual signs, but also how these signs can shape myths and cultural values. Susanti et al. (2022) showed that the semiotic analysis of the representation of feminism in the film *Mulan* (2020) is several scenes that depict the representation of feminism in the 2020 film *Mulan* which has been studied through Roland Barthes' Semiotic theory such as Mulan who disguises herself as a man and fights bravely. The representation of feminism can be seen from the signs and meanings that have been studied through Roland Barthes' Semiotic theory. Tofa (2024) discuss the semiotic analysis of the film *Si Doel the Movie* with a focus on the reality of Betawi culture, especially the Betawi sarong culture. The results of the study show that this film tries to change the stigma and stereotypes towards Betawi people by presenting the calm and educated character of Si Doel. The sarong in this film has a function that changes depending on the wearer and has an emotional bond with Betawi culture. The conclusion of this study is that the film *Si Doel the Movie* represents Betawi culture through the use of symbols such as sarongs and peci.

Overall, these films show how cultural, social, and ideological symbols can be used to convey certain messages to the audience. These studies show that semiotics is effective in uncovering hidden meanings and understanding how films convey ideologies. These studies show that semiotics is effective in uncovering hidden meanings and understanding how films convey ideologies. Roland Barthes' approach to analyzing symbols is particularly useful as it has a layered framework that includes denotation, connotation and myth. By analyzing the denotative, connotative and mythical meanings of the symbols, this research aims to reveal the underlying messages and ideologies of the film, resulting in a more in-depth and convincing interpretation of the film's impact. Compared to other semiotic theories, Barthes' approach is more effective in uncovering the cultural or traditional and ideological dimensions of signs.

Roland Barthes' semiotics is widely used to analyze symbols and meanings in popular films such as *Aladdin, Kono Oto Tomare!, Wish Dragon, Mulan (2020),* and *Si Doel the Movie*. However, there was still no research that analyzed how Roland Barthes' semiotic approach was applied to the Indonesian horror film *Santet Segoro Pitu. Santet Segoro Pitu* has many symbols and cultural values that are unique to Indonesia, especially those related to the belief in witchcraft rituals and shamanism. Previous studies have emphasized general cultural aspects or social values, as evidenced by works such as *Si Doel the Movie* and *Wish Dragon*. In addition, there are still few studies that explore the symbolic elements in Indonesian horror films and their relationship with deeper themes such as the potential of traditions and beliefs that are the themes raised in the film. Therefore, there is a need for research that combines Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis with the culture and genre of Indonesian horror films, especially in *Santet Segoro Pitu*, so that the implied and explicit messages in this film can be clearly understood.

The 2024 Indonesian horror film *"Santet Segoro Pitu",* directed by Tommy Dewo, presents a tense story about business competition involving black magic. This film has reached more than 1 million viewers in Indonesia, which aired on November 7, 2024 in theaters. The movie attracted the attention of the public with a unique storyline that combines intense horror elements with the struggle of a family to fight supernatural forces, which makes it unique and attractive to the audience. The movie also features horror elements combined with the beliefs of the Indonesian people, especially about the rituals and practices of black magic in East Java, which is the core of the film's story. The movie depicts the struggle of the Sucipto family to face the terror of Segoro Pitu witchcraft, which is a high-level black magic rooted in local traditions and beliefs. *"Santet Segoro*

Pitu" is not only entertaining but also allows the audience to reflect on deeper themes such as the power of tradition and belief. The movie combines elements of horror, thriller, and family drama, providing a suspenseful and meaningful viewing experience. In addition to the horror depicted, this film also offers an interesting analysis of symbolism and meaning through a semiotic approach, therefore the researcher chose this film for analysis.

Based on this phenomenon, this study aims to answer the following questions:

1. How do symbols in the movie *Santet Segoro Pitu* reflect elements and practices associated with shamanism and black magic in Indonesia?
2. What are the denotative, connotative, and mythical meanings of the visual signs in *Santet Segoro Pitu* according to Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis?

2.   METHOD

Researchers used a descriptive-qualitative method using screen capture techniques as documentation material. A qualitative approach is an approach that is able to produce descriptive data in the form of speech, writing, and behavior of people being (Alviya et al., 2023). The qualitative method was chosen because this method was often used to examine documents in the form of texts, images, and symbols to understand certain social contexts. In addition, qualitative researchers are interested in people's beliefs, their experiences, and their meaning system from the community's point of view (Furidha, 2023).

The film "*Santet Segoro Pitu*" was the source of data to analyze the semiotic approach to the symbols in the film. By analyzing the visual elements in the film Santet Segoro Pitu that represented beliefs in Indonesia about shamanic practices and black magic, including objects using Roland Barthes' semiotic approach, Roland Barthes' theory played an important role for semiotic analysis in the film Santet Segoro Pitu because his theory was able to reveal the meaning in film signs through three levels of signification: denotation, connotation, and myth. The reason for using qualitative methods was to analyze the symbolic representations found in the film "*Santet Segoro Pitu*" which was the object of this study.

The object of this research was the movie "*Santet Segoro Pitu*" which lasted 1 hour 34 minutes and belonged to the supernatural horror genre. The data collection technique in this study was carried out in the following steps: accessing and watching the entire Santet Segoro Pitu film through the Netflix application to identify and collect data. Next, data collection continued using screen capture techniques as documentation material and analyzing the data. Then, the researcher observed the selected symbols and used triangulation methods to combine semiotic analysis with other methods, such as narrative analysis or cultural research, to obtain a more comprehensive understanding that did not rely on a single method alone.

3.   RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
3.1. Elements and Practices Related to Shamanism and Black Magic in the Film "*Santet Segoro Pitu*"

The symbols in the film Santet Segoro Pitu clearly reflect elements and practices of Indonesian shamanism and black magic through depictions of rituals, sacred objects, and traditional beliefs inherent in local culture, particularly in Java and the southern coast of Java. For example, the appearance of a "mysterious package" or "cursed amulet" found by the character Sucipto becomes a symbol that triggers supernatural events in the film and represents the practice of santet as a form of black magic in local culture. This object is not depicted in detail visually but functions as a connotative sign that reinforces the myths and fears of the community regarding dangerous black magic. Thus, this film not only presents visual elements but also raises deep cultural meanings that reinforce the values of belief in supernatural powers and shamanistic practices that are alive in Indonesian society.

3.1.1 Element 1 : Suanggi

Suanggi is the main antagonist in this film, a creature explicitly summoned by a high-level shaman and practitioner of black magic. The cinematic depiction of Suanggi is described as "a demonic creature with horns, claws, and only half a human body." This depiction is explicitly modeled after the real evil spirit from the folklore of Eastern Indonesia. In Indonesian folklore, particularly from the eastern regions, Suanggi is widely believed to be an evil spirit that causes mysterious illnesses, death, and even eats human hearts.

The prominent use of the Suanggi creature in the film, along with other elements of black magic, reinforces the broader societal belief that black magic is not merely superstition but a "real threat coexisting within social life." This narrative choice contributes to the preservation of the myth of active supernatural evil influencing the daily lives of Indonesians. By depicting these supernatural elements as direct, life-threatening forces that affect the protagonist, the film participates in validating a cultural discourse that views such forces as real and dangerous. This reinforces the "myth" that these practices are not merely historical folklore but part of a mystical reality that is alive for many Indonesians, even in the face of growing skepticism among younger generations.

3.1.2 Element 2: Rituals and Specific Objects Depicted

This film prominently features a "purification ritual" as the key to countering the black magic that has been cast. This ritual is a dangerous one that requires Ardi and Syifa to collect "water from seven beaches" where the antagonistic shaman had previously built an "altar." The "holy water" collected is then used to pour over Sucipto, the father affected by black magic, while reciting prayers for the expulsion of demons. The defeat of the demon Suanggi is achieved by pouring water from the final beach directly at him. The film also implicitly references traditional black magic methods, such as inserting foreign objects into the victim's body, exemplified by Marni's stomach filled with nails.

The "search to collect water from seven beaches" and the subsequent "purification ritual" serve as powerful symbolic representations of traditional Indonesian spiritual warfare, emphasizing a deep belief in geographically specific magical powers and the efficacy of counter-rituals. The concept of "seven seas" in the film's title, "*Santet Segoro Pitu*", strongly implies a vast source of magical power, potentially spread across geographical regions. Traditional Indonesian mysticism often associates spiritual power with specific natural locations (e.g., bodies of water, mountains, ancient trees) or ritually sanctified spaces (altars). This narrative sequence semiotically conveys that the battle against black magic is not merely a psychological or physical confrontation but a profound spiritual journey demanding adherence to proper traditional protocols, often challenging. "Holy water" itself serves as a strong symbol of purity, cleansing, and the intervention of benevolent spiritual forces to counteract evil powers.

3.1.3 Element 3 : The Role of Shamans and Practitioners of Black Magic

The film features "high-level shamans and practitioners of black magic" who are responsible for summoning Suanggi creatures and initiating black magic. In contrast, Rustam, a spiritualist, plays a positive role, helping Ardi understand his abilities and initiating a purification ritual to counter the curse. Furthermore, the plot reveals that Sucipto himself had previously consulted a shaman to use black magic for the success of his business.

In Indonesia, spiritual practitioners known as "dukun" have various roles, ranging from traditional healers to black magic practitioners known as 'bomoh' and feared. Santet rituals are typically performed at the request of someone to a shaman for reasons such as hatred or revenge, and there is usually a fee or "mahar" that must be paid. Shamans are believed to possess special abilities to perform and protect against black magic. The film portrays dukuns with two sides: as perpetrators of evil and as healers or protectors. This portrayal reflects the complex view of shamans in Indonesian society, where traditional beliefs coexist with modern life without a clear distinction between good and evil spiritual powers. In this culture, spiritual powers are considered neutral, and their morality depends on the intentions of the shaman and the goals of the person seeking help. This highlights the moral dilemma of using supernatural powers, where the line between good and evil is often blurred.

The story of Sucipto, who initially relied on a shaman to develop his business but then faced a curse as retribution, conveys the moral message that using supernatural powers for material gain can have adverse consequences. Despite seemingly positive outcomes, such as economic success, such actions will trigger negative consequences or unforeseen karma. This sequence of events delivers a clear moral lesson within the story. This story reinforces the common belief in many societies, including Indonesia, that gains obtained unfairly, especially through black magic, will not last long and will bring about negative consequences. This story serves as a strong warning in horror films, reflecting society's concerns about excessive ambition and violations of traditional moral rules in spiritual practices.

3.2. Semiotic Interpretation: Denotation, Connotation, and Myth in "*Santet Segoro Pitu*"
3.2.1. Mysterious Package or Cursed Amulet

Figure 1. Mysterious package or cursed amulet

Denotatively, this package refers to the unknown package found by Sucipto, which was later understood to be a "cursed amulet." The second amulet, which was similar, was involved in Arif's death.

Connotatively, this mysterious package implies a cunning and hidden threat—an evil "gift" or disturbance. As an amulet, it implies a powerful conduit for black magic, an object imbued with dark and destructive forces. Its immediate and devastating effect on the family suggests a targeted and unprovoked attack, likely stemming from intense rivalry.

Mythologically, this symbol is closely tied to the Indonesian myth of santet, where real objects are often used as tools for revenge or to bring down business rivals. This reinforces the belief that material success can provoke jealousy, which then triggers supernatural attacks. The amulet, though its form is not detailed, serves as a strong symbol of the looming and insidious danger of santet. The cursed amulet was found in an ordinary place, outside Sucipto's business premises. After its discovery, strange and dangerous events immediately occurred in the house, eventually leading to severe illness and death. This reinforces the cultural belief that black magic is an ever-present threat that can strike anyone at any time. Black magic disrupts a sense of security and highlights how vulnerable one is to supernatural forces, especially when there is strong envy or business competition.

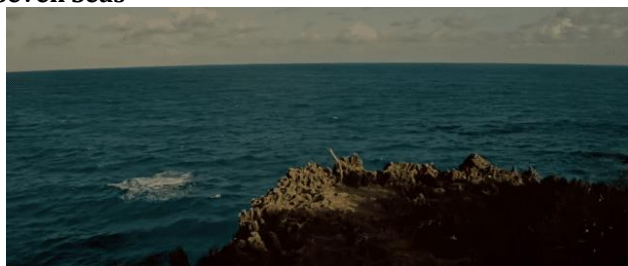### 3.2.2. The Segoro Pitu or Seven Seas

Figure 2. The segoro pitu or seven seas

Denotatively, it literally depicts the ocean, which may feature seven different points or locations along the southern coast of Java. Connotatively, the sea in Indonesian culture, especially the southern sea, is often associated with powerful and wild forces, mystical entities, and the spirit world. It symbolizes danger, respect, and the unknown. It can also symbolize the goddess Nyi Roro Kidul. Mythically, "Segoro Pitu" is a source of extraordinary power, both natural and supernatural. This reinforces cultural beliefs in the spiritual potential of certain geographical locations and the idea that these places can be used for good or evil through shamanistic practices

3.2.3. The Dukun or Shaman

Figure 3. The dukun or shaman

Denotatively, an individual, usually elderly, who performs rituals, prays, and handles certain objects. Played by Yati Surachman, who is explicitly involved in "black magic practices." In addition, Mr. Rustam is portrayed as another spiritual figure who is "involved in spiritualism" and provides assistance to the protagonists. Connotatively, the shaman represents the role of an intermediary between the human world and the spirit world. This character symbolizes ancient knowledge, supernatural abilities, and connections to powers beyond ordinary understanding.

The myth here is the enduring belief of the community in the power of shamans and their integral, often ambiguous, role in addressing illness and spiritual conflict in Indonesian society. The film comprehensively portrays "shamans" as "traditional healers" and "sorcerers and practitioners of black magic," who are "highly respected and somewhat feared." The myth is that these figures are not merely characters in a story but important and powerful actors in the spiritual economy, whose involvement is necessary and required when supernatural forces come into play, reflecting a deep cultural acceptance of their existence and influence.

Shamans reinforce cultural myths about "smart people" or those who have the ability to influence events through supernatural means. This reinforces the belief in the power of traditional practices and the existence of individuals with extraordinary spiritual gifts.

3.2.4. Suanggi Entity

Figure 4. Suanggi entity

Denotatively, it is a terrifying figure rendered with CGI depicted in the film. Visually, it is depicted as a frightening non-human entity with certain characteristics. Connotatively, suanggi is considered to be the actual manifestation of black magic itself. Its terrifying appearance signifies evil power and destructive curses. Suanggi makes the usually invisible threat of black magic tangible and frightening, thereby making the audience feel more afraid and affected.

Mythologically, suanggi is a naturalized existence of a culturally recognized evil entity from Indonesian folklore as a real and active threat. The film explicitly states that Suanggi is "from eastern Indonesia (Papua, Maluku, and Nusa Tenggara)" and that its visual depiction aligns with characteristics circulating in the mythology of several tribes in Papua and Nusa Tenggara. This naturalizes the idea that these regional spirits are real, can be summoned or weaponized through black magic, and actively participate in the spiritual world.

3.2.5. Ruwatan (Protective Ritual)

Figure 5. Ruwatan (protective ritual)

Denotatively, a traditional Javanese ritual performed to ward off bad luck, purify, or counteract curses. In the film, it is explicitly presented as an "antidote" to *Santet Segoro Pitu*. Connotatively, it represents hope, purification, spiritual defense, adherence to tradition, the power of indigenous belief systems, and a desperate last-ditch effort against extraordinary evil. This signifies a return to ancestral wisdom and spiritual heritage as the primary source of protection and healing.

Mythologically, this symbol naturalizes the cultural myth of ruwatan as a legitimate, powerful, and effective means of spiritual cleansing and protection against evil forces. By positioning traditional rituals as the only viable antidote to black magic, the film implicitly critiques the limitations of modern solutions in addressing deeply rooted traditional issues. This reinforces the idea that ancestral practices possess inherent power, wisdom, and resilience, offering a sense of cultural continuity and a path to overcoming seemingly insurmountable supernatural threats.

3.2.6. Offerings

Figure 6. Offerings

In denotation, sajen are various ritual paraphernalia consisting of flowers, rice, incense, holy water, fruit, and black chicken used in ceremonies or rituals. The offerings in this movie are part of a mystical ritual performed to send or ward off witchcraft. These offerings are spread across seven beaches as part of a supernatural ceremony related to "*Santet Segoro Pitu*". Connotatively, the offerings represent sacrifice, tradition, communication between the human world and the supernatural world, and a form of respect for spiritual power. Each element in the offerings has a specific symbolic meaning in Javanese tradition.

Mythically, offerings in Javanese culture are believed to be a medium to invoke protection and communicate with ancestors or guardian spirits. The movie reinforces the myth that offerings are an important element in spiritual rituals. The mythology also features the belief that offerings and rituals at the seven beaches are a way to maintain the balance between the human world and the supernatural world, as well as a protection from threatening black magic.

3.2.7. Antagonist Shaman Altar

Figure 7. Antagonist shaman altar

The antagonist shaman's altar is a specific location where the antagonist shaman has "previously built" and from which "the waters of the seven shores" are collected. Denotatively, it is a site for performing dark rituals. Connotatively, this altar implies a point of evil power, a space consecrated to illicit practices, and the source of the curse that befalls the Sucipto family. It symbolizes the ritualistic foundation of black magic, the place where the portal between the human and supernatural worlds thins, allowing dark forces to be summoned and directed. It denotes a deliberate act of aggression.

Mythologically, this symbol naturalizes the cultural myth that certain sites can be infused with dark spiritual energy through ritualistic acts, serving as centers of black magic operations. It reinforces the belief in the power of ritualistic geography and the idea that evil spiritual forces are often rooted in physical space, making the threat feel more pervasive and geographically bound to the conflict. These altars embody the 'roots' of evil and the deliberate construction of evil. The fact that "water from the seven shores" must be collected from the location where the antagonist shaman had previously built the altar creates a direct cause-and-effect relationship between the source of evil and the means to undo it. It implies a "ritualistic geography" in which antidote rituals must directly engage the sites of evil forces. This reinforces the cultural belief that spiritual battles often take place in specific and ritually significant areas, and that the "cure" must directly confront the "source" in a geographically and ritually appropriate manner.

4. CONCLUSION

This analysis answers the research questions concerning the reflection of these practices in the symbols and the denotative, connotative, and mythological meanings of these visual signs. In the first study, it was determined that the symbols in "Santet Segoro Pitu" authentically depict elements and practices of

traditional Indonesian shamanism and black magic. Meanwhile, in the second study, the results of Barthes' semiotic analysis revealed that these visual signs carry multiple meanings: denotatively as physical objects, connotatively implying evil intentions and supernatural influences, and mythologically acting as manifestations of the Javanese belief system that combines the real and supernatural worlds—providing depth of meaning in understanding people's perceptions of magic and spiritual beliefs. The primary contribution of this study lies in demonstrating Roland Barthes's semiotic framework as a robust framework for unraveling the complex interactions between popular culture (film) and deeply held cultural beliefs, particularly in non-Western contexts. The study demonstrates that Barthes's theory has strong universal application, while simultaneously highlighting the unique ways in which specific cultural nuances are encoded and decoded through cinematic language.

The film "*Santet Segoro Pitu*" serves as a powerful medium for exploring and reinforcing traditional Indonesian beliefs, moral lessons, and the power of indigenous spiritual practices in a contemporary context. The success of this film and its semiotic content show that traditional beliefs, even in modernizing societies, continue to exert significant influence on popular imagination and cultural discourse. This demonstrates that the horror genre, often viewed solely as entertainment, can serve as an important lens for understanding the complex interplay between tradition and modernity within a specific cultural landscape. More broadly, this research reaffirms the importance of popular culture as a legitimate and powerful site for academic inquiry into societal values, fears, and belief systems. It shows that genre cinema, often overlooked, can serve as an important mirror for understanding how societies grapple with their spiritual heritage in the modern era.

For future research, it would be valuable to explore audience reception of these films, particularly how different demographics (e.g., younger vs. older generations) interpret and interact with depictions of black magic and shamanism. Comparative studies with other Indonesian horror films or horror films from non-Western cultures could also provide further insight into how specific myths and beliefs are adapted and conveyed through cinematic media.

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