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by Imamul Masyhudi

Submission date: 06-Oct-2026 02:46PM (UTC+0700)

Submission ID: 3052033664

File name: sis_and_Character_Representation_in_the_Film_Panji_Tengkorak.pdf (1.62M)

Word count: 4121

Character count: 23577

DARK FANTASY AESTHETICS IN INDONESIAN ANIMATION: VISUAL ANALYSIS AND CHARACTER REPRESENTATION IN THE FILM PANJI TENGGORAK

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Received Apr. 06, 2026; Revised June. 10, 2026; Accepted June. 17, 2026.

Abstract: *The animated film Panji Tengkorak (2025), produced by Falcon Pictures, presents a distinctive visual approach within the development of Indonesian animation through its application of dark fantasy aesthetics and a narrative aimed at adult audiences. This study aims to analyze the construction of dark fantasy visual aesthetics and the reinterpretation of the traditional Indonesian jawara figure as represented through the visual attributes of the main character. The research uses a descriptive qualitative approach using formalist aesthetic analysis and Roland Barthes' visual semiotics. The research data consist of 12 visual excerpts (film stills) selected through purposive sampling based on their relevance to elements of color, lighting, visual texture, character attributes, and the main narrative conflict. The findings reveal that the dominance of an earth-tone color palette, chiaroscuro lighting, and rough visual textures creates a dark fantasy atmosphere characterized by gloom and psychological tension. The semiotic analysis indicates that the character's visual attributes, including the skull mask, clothing and bodily scars, and weaponry, generate denotative, connotative, and mythical meanings that represent the jawara figure as a traumatized survivor, socially alienated, and morally ambiguous individual. These findings demonstrate that visual aesthetics function not only to establish narrative atmosphere but also to reconstruct the meaning of heroism within the context of contemporary Indonesian popular culture.*

Keywords: *Indonesian animation; dark fantasy; visual aesthetics; visual semiotics; jawara figure*

Introduction

The Indonesian animation industry has experienced rapid growth over the past decade. However, most local animation productions remain oriented toward children's and family genres, featuring relatively bright visual styles and adhering

to main-stream animation aesthetic standards. The animated film Panji Tengkorak (2025), produced by Falcon Pictures, offers a different approach. The film not only targets adult audiences (17+) but also presents a dark fantasy aesthetic that has rarely been explored in Indone-

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sian animation.

Dark fantasy is a fantasy sub-genre that combines fantasy elements with horror, tragedy, and complex psychological conflicts. Visually, this genre is characterized by the use of muted color palettes, high-contrast lighting (*chiaroscuro*), bleak environments, and characters that embody trauma and moral ambiguity. Visual elements such as color, character design, and visual expression play an important role in shaping the artistic identity of an animated work (Chen, 2025), while lighting and environmental design function as visual signs that construct narrative atmosphere and ideological meaning (Saputri & Rahmawati, 2025).

As an adaptation of the legendary comic created by Hans Jaladara (1968), *Panji Tengkorak* faces the challenge of transforming the visual language of a classic comic into a contemporary animation medium. Adaptation from a static medium to an audiovisual medium involves not only the transfer of narrative content but also the transformation of aesthetics and systems of visual representation (Hutcheon, 2006; Wells, 1998). In this film, such transformation is evident through the use of a limited color palette, dramatic lighting, and character designs that emphasize rough textures to create a dark atmosphere filled with psychological tension.

Beyond being a comic adaptation, *Panji Tengkorak* is also noteworthy because it presents a reinterpretation of the traditional Indonesian *jawara* figure. Reinterpretation refers to the process of assigning new meaning to an existing concept through a new perspective or within a different historical context (Gadamer et al., 2004). In classical heroic traditions, a hero is understood as a figure possessing courage, moral integrity, and a willingness to sacrifice for a greater cause (Campbell, 1949). However, this film portrays *Panji* as a traumatized, alienated, and morally

ambiguous character, thereby offering a new reading of the *jawara* figure within contemporary popular culture.

To understand this phenomenon, the present study uses formalist aesthetics and visual semiotics as its analytical framework. Formalist aesthetics focuses on the organization of visual elements and the relationships among artistic components in constructing the visual quality of a work (Bell, 1914). In the context of film, color, lighting, and visual texture are formal elements that contribute to the formation of mood, visual identity, and the audience's cinematic experience (Bordwell & Thompson, 2010). Visual aesthetics is not solely concerned with formal beauty but also with how visual elements communicate messages, emotions, and deeper meanings (Prasetyo & Masyhudi, 2024). Therefore, the analysis of visual aspects in film should be conducted not only at the level of form but also at the level of meaning. A semiotic approach enables the analysis of symbolic and ideological meanings embedded in visual elements of animation, including character attributes and visual objects (Yunus & Aswar, 2024). Furthermore, Barthes' visual semiotics (1977) is used to understand how character visual attributes function as signs that generate denotative, connotative, and ideological mythological meanings.

Previous studies on Indonesian animation have primarily focused on aspects of industrial production (Daulay & Kusumawardhani, 2020), character representation (Ekawardhani et al., 2020), and the visual identity of local culture (Mudana et al., 2024). Meanwhile, studies on dark fantasy have tended to develop within the contexts of anime and Western animation (Saputri & Rahmawati, 2025), while research on comic-to-animation adaptation generally focuses on medium transformation and narrative structure (Hutcheon, 2006; Wells, 1998). Although these

areas of scholarship have advanced independently, the relationship between dark fantasy aesthetics, local comic adaptation, and the reinterpretation of traditional Indonesian heroic figures has rarely been examined collectively. No study has been found that specifically analyzes how dark fantasy aesthetics are used in local comic adaptations to reinterpret and represent the Indonesian jawara figure.

Based on this gap in the literature, the present study seeks to analyze how dark fantasy visual aesthetics are constructed through color, lighting, and visual texture in Panji Tengkorak (2025), as well as how the visual attributes of the character, including the skull mask, clothing and bodily scars, and weaponry, are used to reinterpret the jawara figure within the context of contemporary Indonesian animation.

Research Questions

1. How are visual aesthetics constructed through the elements of color, lighting, and visual texture in building the dark fantasy atmosphere of the animated film Panji Tengkorak?
2. How do the denotative, connotative, and mythological meanings generated through the visual attributes of the character Panji Tengkorak, including the skull mask, clothing and bodily scars, and weaponry, contribute to the reinterpretation of the traditional Indonesian jawara figure?

Research Significance

Theoretically, this study is expected to enrich the fields of visual communication design and animation studies, particularly in relation to the construction of dark fantasy aesthetics in local comic adaptations and the representation of the traditional

Indonesian jawara figure through the perspectives of formalist aesthetics and visual semiotics.

Practically, the findings of this study may serve as a reference for animation practitioners in transforming classical intellectual properties (IPs) into visual works that remain relevant to contemporary developments while preserving their cultural essence.

Methodology

Research Design

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach using formalist aesthetic analysis and visual semiotics. The qualitative approach is utilized to understand and interpret the visual meanings presented in the animated film Panji Tengkorak, particularly those related to dark fantasy aesthetics and the representation of the main character. This approach enables a comprehensive and systematic understanding of the visual phenomena depicted in the film. The analysis is conducted by examining aesthetic elements in detail to understand how the dark fantasy atmosphere and character reinterpretation are constructed.

Research Object

The object of this study is the animated film Panji Tengkorak (2025), produced by Falcon Pictures. The data focus on units of analysis consisting of scene excerpts (film stills), the visual attributes of the main character, including the skull mask, clothing and bodily scars, and weaponry, as well as visual elements such as color, lighting, and visual texture that represent the research theme.

This study analyzes 12 visual excerpts selected through purposive sampling because they are considered the most rep-

representative in displaying the construction of a dark fantasy atmosphere and the visual attributes of Panji Tengkorak that are associated with the reinterpretation of the jawara figure. The selection of the stills was based on the appearance of the main character, the dominance of specific color palettes, the use of dramatic lighting (*chiaroscuro*), the presence of prominent visual textures, and the representation of the film's primary narrative conflicts.

Table 1. Selected Film Stills and Analysis Elements

No	Timestamp	Scene Description	Analysis Element
1	00:01:02	Panji's Battle	High-Contrast Colors
2	00:01:31	Silhouette of Panji Tengkorak	Rough Visual Texture
3	00:34:22	Stabbing an Enemy with a Sword	Weaponry
4	00:45:55	Holding Murni's Body	Clothing and Bodily Scars
5	00:57:12	Holding a Skull	Skull Mask
6	00:57:37	holding a staff weapon	Earth-Tone Colors
7	01:09:57	Panji Tengkorak in Combat	Clothing and Bodily Scars
8	01:10:00	Holding a Sword	Skull Mask
9	01:12:26	Weapon Duel with an Opponent	Weaponry
10	01:24:50	Panji's Battle with the Main Antagonist	Rough Visual Texture
11	01:28:59	Skull Mask	Chiaroscuro Lighting
12	01:29:43	Holding a Torch	Chiaroscuro Lighting

Data Collection Techniques

The data in this study were collected from two sources:

1. Primary Data

Primary data were collected through textual observation. This process involved watching, observing, and documenting film scenes through screen capture techniques to identify visual elements relevant to the research focus. Some of the visual

excerpts used as analytical illustrations were obtained from publicly available documentation on IMDb due to technical limitations in capturing screenshots directly from the film.

2. Secondary Data

Secondary data were obtained through a literature review of scholarly journals, books on aesthetic theory, film criticism articles, and supporting documents related to the original Panji Tengkorak comic by Hans Jaladara.

Research Instrument

The primary instrument in this study is the researcher as a human instrument. The researcher acts as an observer who identifies, classifies, and interprets visual elements based on the theories of Formalist Aesthetics and Visual Semiotics.

Data Analysis Techniques

The data were analyzed through the following stages:

1. Data Reduction

Relevant film stills were selected and categorized based on visual elements such as color, lighting, visual texture, and the visual attributes of the main character, including the skull mask, clothing and bodily scars, and weaponry, which contribute to the construction of character meaning.

2. Data Presentation

Selected visual excerpts were presented and described by examining formal elements, including color, lighting, and visual texture, as well as the character's visual attributes depicted in the selected scenes.

3. Theoretical Interpretation

The visual findings were interpreted

using aesthetic theory to explain how the dark fantasy atmosphere is constructed. Roland Barthes' visual semiotics was used to identify the denotative, connotative, and mythological meanings that contribute to the reinterpretation of the jawara figure through the visual attributes of the character Panji Tengkorak.

4. Conclusion Drawing

Final conclusions were formulated regarding the construction of dark fantasy aesthetics and the reinterpretation of the jawara figure as a form of visual innovation in the animated film Panji Tengkorak.

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Research Analysis Framework

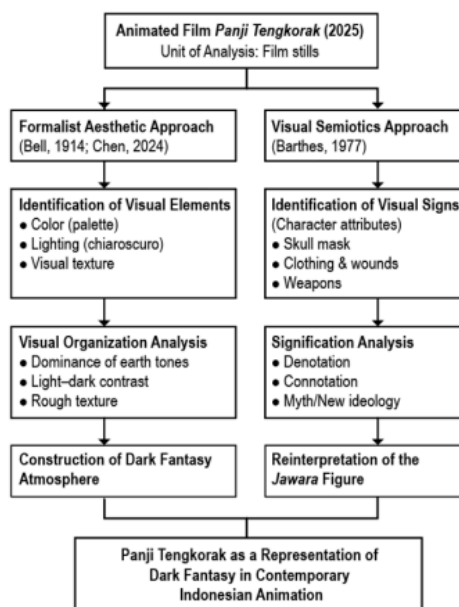


Figure 1. Research Analysis Framework
(Source: Author's elaboration, 2025)

Result

Formalist Aesthetic Analysis: Constructing the Dark Fantasy Atmosphere

The formalist aesthetic analysis shows that the dark fantasy atmosphere in Panji Tengkorak is constructed through the consistent organization of visual elements, particularly color palette, lighting, and texture. These three elements work together to create a bleak narrative world filled with tension while representing the psychological conflicts experienced by the characters.

1. Dominance of Earth-Tone Colors



Figure 2. Earth-Tone and Muted Color Palette
(Source: Panji Tengkorak film, produced by Falcon Pictures, via IMDb)



Figure 3. Use of Contrasting Colors
(Source: Panji Tengkorak (2025), Falcon Pictures, via IMDb)

In contrast to mainstream animation, which tends to employ bright and vibrant color schemes, Panji Tengkorak is dominated by an earth-tone palette consisting of dark brown, gray, and black, while red appears only as a contrasting color in specific elements such as blood and fire. From a formalist aesthetic perspective, this organization of color shapes the emotional quality of the work through the relationships among visual elements (Bell, 1914; Chen, 2025). The dominance of muted and dark colors creates the impression of a bleak, alienated world marked by moral decline, thereby reinforcing the film's

dark fantasy atmosphere.

2. Chiaroscuro Lighting

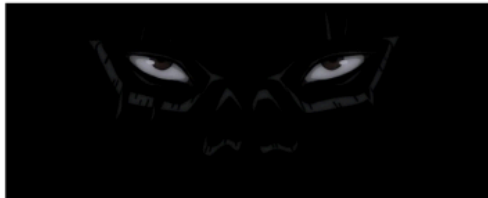


Figure 4. Dark-Light Contrast Through Chiaroscuro Lighting
(Source: Panji Tengkorak (2025), Falcon Pictures, via IMDb)

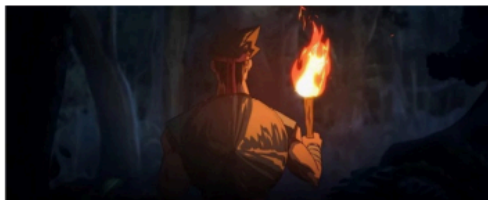


Figure 5. Lighting That Creates a Sense of Mystery
(Source: Panji Tengkorak (2025), Falcon Pictures, via IMDb)

The study found the use of extreme dark-light contrast in many scenes. Shadows function not only as indicators of dimension but also as artistic elements that partially obscure the characters' faces or bodies. This lighting creates spatial depth and enhances a sense of mystery while reflecting Panji's inner psychological darkness. These visual findings reinforce the characteristics of dark fantasy, in which a bleak atmosphere is constructed through the dominance of muted colors, high-contrast lighting, and the representation of the characters' psychological conflicts.

3. Rough Visual Texture



Figure 6. Sharp and Irregular Visual Textures
(Source: Panji Tengkorak (2025), Falcon Pictures, via IMDb)



Figure 7. Fight scene with rough visual texture
(Source: Panji Tengkorak (2025), Falcon Pictures, via IMDb)

Visual texture is constructed through the use of sharp lines, irregular forms, and rough-looking surfaces across environmental elements such as rocks, soil, and character costumes. The organization of these elements creates the impression of a harsh, brutal, and unstable world. Rough textures and irregular lines function as visual strategies that reject the romanticization of the martial world. The world constructed by the film appears brutal and unstable, thereby reinforcing the dark fantasy ideology that positions violence as an inherent part of narrative reality.

Semiotic Analysis: Reinterpreting the Jawara Character

This section examines how the identity of the traditional jawara (warrior-hero) is fundamentally transformed into a darker and more complex figure.

1. Symbolism of the Skull Mask



Figure 8. A skull mask covers Panji's face
(Source: Panji Tengkorak (2025), Falcon Pictures, via IMDb)



Figure 9. Skull Mask Details
(Source: Panji Tengkorak (2025), Falcon Pictures, via IMDb)

Denotative: The mask is a representation of a human skull.

Connotative: The mask signifies symbolic death, loss of identity, and the character's alienation from social life.

Mythological: The jawara is no longer represented as a symbol of moral victory but rather as a survivor burdened by trauma and the violence of the past. The skull mask symbolizes not only death but also the obscuring of Panji's personal identity, so that heroism is no longer defined by honor or moral exemplarity. At the mythological level, this attribute represents a transformation of the jawara figure from an ideal hero into a traumatized, alienated, and morally ambiguous character.

2. Clothing and Bodily Scar



Figure 10. Panji in Combat
(Source: Panji Tengkorak (2025), Falcon Pictures, via IMDb)



Figure 11. Panji as a Survivor
(Source: Panji Tengkorak (2025), Falcon Pictures, via IMDb)

Denotative: The worn clothing, torn fabric, and scars on Panji's body indicate the physical condition of a fighter who has endured numerous battles.

Connotative: These elements construct the image of a character shaped by traumatic experiences and prolonged violence.

Mythological: The bodily scars represent not only the physical consequences of combat but also a visual archive of traumatic experiences that remain inscribed on Panji's body. Unlike traditional representations of the jawara, which are commonly associated with strength and honor, Panji is portrayed as a figure who is both vulnerable and capable of survival. Through this visual strategy, the film reinterprets heroism not as a symbol of perfection but as the capacity to endure and confront suffering.

3. Weaponry



Figure 12. Representation of Weaponry in a Combat Scene
(Source: Panji Tengkorak (2025), Falcon Pictures, via IMDb)



Figure 13. Brutalism and Physical Reality
(Source: Panji Tengkorak (2025), Falcon Pictures, via IMDb)

Denotative: The weapon is depicted as a simple, functional, and lethal tool of combat. Unlike weapons in traditional fantasy, which are often portrayed with magical auras or elaborate ornamentation, the weapon in Panji Tengkorak emphasizes practicality and effectiveness.

Connotative: This representation conveys the idea that strength does not originate from magical forces but from lived experience, suffering, and the protagonist's ability to endure. The weapon functions not only as a tool for combat but also as an extension of Panji's identity as a survivor living in a harsh and brutal world. In this context, the weapon signifies the close relationship between violence and survival.

Mythological: Through the representation of weaponry as functional and largely devoid of romanticization, the film shifts the image of heroism from a figure endowed with extraordinary power to a character who must confront the real consequences of every conflict. The weapon is not positioned as a sacred artifact or a symbol of magical power, as is common-

ly found in heroic fantasy. Instead, it is presented as a tool for survival that represents the harsh realities of the narrative world. This visual strategy reinforces the reinterpretation of the jawara figure as a traumatized and morally ambiguous character who nevertheless possesses the resilience to endure violence and suffering.

Synthesis of Findings

The findings indicate that the construction of the dark fantasy atmosphere and the reinterpretation of the jawara figure in Panji Tengkorak are two closely interconnected visual aspects. The dark fantasy atmosphere is constructed through the dominance of earth-tone colors, chiaroscuro lighting, and rough visual textures, while the reinterpretation of the jawara figure is realized through the character's visual attributes, including the skull mask, clothing and bodily scars, and simple, functional weaponry.

The relationship between these two aspects demonstrates that visual aesthetics in the film function not only to establish narrative atmosphere but also to serve as a means of character representation. The dark, harsh, and oppressive visual environment provides the context for the emergence of Panji as a traumatized, alienated, and morally ambiguous survivor. Consequently, Panji is no longer represented as an ideal hero associated with courage and moral victory, as traditionally portrayed in classical heroic representations of the jawara. Instead, he is depicted as a character who must confront the psychological and physical consequences of every conflict he experiences.

These findings suggest that the adaptation of the Panji Tengkorak comic into an animated film involves more than a visual transformation. It also offers a new

interpretation of the jawara figure within Indonesian popular culture. Dark fantasy aesthetics are used as a visual strategy to reconstruct the meaning of heroism, making it more closely aligned with character complexity and the realities of conflict faced by modern individuals. In a broader context, Panji Tengkorak demonstrates how local intellectual property can be adapted into contemporary visual forms without abandoning its cultural roots, while simultaneously expanding the possibilities of representation in Indonesian animation, which has traditionally been dominated by narratives and aesthetics oriented toward children and family audiences.

Conclusion

Based on the visual and aesthetic analysis of the animated film Panji Tengkorak (2025), several key conclusions can be drawn:

First, the application of formalist aesthetic elements successfully constructs a consistent dark fantasy atmosphere. The use of a muted earth-tone color palette and chiaroscuro lighting techniques does not function solely as an artistic device but also as a narrative strategy for creating a bleak, oppressive, and mysterious world. This finding demonstrates that local animation is capable of moving beyond the bright aesthetic conventions that have long dominated the industry and can establish a more mature and cinematic visual identity.

Second, the semiotic analysis reveals a significant reinterpretation of the traditional jawara figure. Panji is no longer represented as a heroic martial arts warrior who is brave and flawless. Instead, he is portrayed as a traumatized figure who bears visible signs of suffering. The symbolism of the skull mask, clothing and bodily scars, and simple, functional weap-

onry constructs a reinterpretation of the jawara as a traumatized, alienated, and morally ambiguous survivor. This visual strategy successfully revitalizes a classic Indonesian intellectual property (IP) by presenting a more complex and humanized interpretation of the jawara figure.

The dark fantasy aesthetics of Panji Tengkorak function not only to construct a visual atmosphere but also as a representational strategy that reinterprets the jawara figure within the context of contemporary Indonesian popular culture.

Recommendation

This study is limited to the analysis of visual elements and character design from the perspectives of formalist aesthetics and semiotics. Future researchers are encouraged to explore other aspects, such as sound design and musical score, in constructing tension within the dark fantasy genre. In addition, studies on audience reception of the visual transformation of this legendary character would provide valuable insights into the extent to which Indonesian audiences accept the reinterpretation of their cultural icon.

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