

## VISUALIZING THE SACRED: Cross-cultural Constructions of Fear and Religious Authority in Horror Cinema

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**Abstract:** Horror cinema functions as a powerful medium for articulating cultural anxieties about the metaphysical and the sacred. While Western horror frequently reflects concern about the erosion of religious faith, Southeast Asian horror, particularly in Indonesia, remains deeply embedded in localized theological traditions. This study examines contrasting representations of religious fear by comparing the construction of Demons in Western cinema (*The Exorcist*, *Hereditary*) and Jinn in Indonesian cinema (*Qodrat*, *Pengabdian Setan*). Drawing on Roland Barthes's semiotic framework, specifically the interplay of denotation, connotation, and myth, this research decodes key religious signifiers, including the crucifix, exorcism rituals, Qur'anic recitation (*ruqyah*), and cultic imagery. The findings reveal a marked cosmological divergence: Western horror tends to portray the demonic as a symptom of a modern spiritual crisis and the tension between faith and secular rationality, whereas Indonesian horror situates the Jinn within the dynamics of public piety, Islamic orthodoxy, and syncretism, and critiques religious authority. Beyond their entertainment value, these films function as cultural texts that construct myths about divine power and spiritual vulnerability. This study contributes to scholarship on religion and media by proposing a cross-cultural semiotic model that demonstrates how horror cinema operates as a theological battleground in the modern imagination.

**Keywords:** Religious horror, Barthesian semiotics, Demons–jinn, Religion, Media, Representations of fear.

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**Article history:** Received: January 23, 2025 | Revised: May 22, 2024 | Available online: June 01, 2025.

**How to cite this article:** Aisyah, Ratu Kasih, and Akhmad Siddiq. "Visualizing the Sacred: Cross-Cultural Constructions of Fear and Religious Authority in Horror Cinema." *Journal of Islamic Philosophy and Contemporary Thought* 3, no. 1 (2025). <https://doi.org/10.15642/jipct.2025.3.1.89-129>.

## Introduction

Horror films have become one of the most influential genres in the global cultural landscape, serving as both adrenaline-fueled entertainment and a medium that produces, disseminates, and negotiates religious, political, and ideological meanings in modern society. In many countries, horror serves as a cultural archive that stores collective anxieties, traumatic memories, and imaginative constructions of the supernatural world. As revealed by Stone,<sup>1</sup> Western horror essentially arose from Christianity's long struggle with the concepts of evil, sin, and supernatural powers; thus, the aesthetics of horror can never be separated from the theological imagination that surrounds it. Meanwhile, Indonesian horror developed as a meeting ground between local folklore, media modernity, and religious symbols that continue to change in line with political and social dynamics.<sup>2</sup> Thus, horror is an arena for representing fear, a field of symbolic contestation where religion, popular culture, and public imagination intertwine.

In the context of media globalization, horror films present epistemological tensions between the sacred and the profane, tradition and modernity, and religiosity and commercialization. Wiggins<sup>3</sup> argues that in a society that is increasingly “*biblically aware but biblically illiterate*,” horror films have become a new source of demonological imagination and perceptions of supernatural powers. At the same time, Laycock<sup>4</sup> demonstrates how the cultural cycle of “The Exorcist effect” fosters a reciprocal relationship between horror films and religious practices; films are inspired by religion, but religion is also

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<sup>1</sup> Bryan P. Stone, *Christianity and Horror Cinema*, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 2025), 20-22, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003590934>.

<sup>2</sup> Peter J. Bräunlein and Andrea Lauser, *Ghost Movies in Southeast Asia and Beyond: Narratives, Cultural Contexts, Audiences* (BRILL, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004323643>.

<sup>3</sup> Steve A. Wiggins, *Nightmares with the Bible: The Good Book and Cinematic Demons* (Bloomsbury Publishing Plc., 2020), 33.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph P. Laycock and Eric Harrelson, *The Exorcist Effect: Horror, Religion, and Demonic Belief*, 1st ed. (Oxford University Press New York, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197635391.001.0001>.

influenced by films. This phenomenon demonstrates that the media no longer merely reflect religious beliefs, but also help shape them.

In Southeast Asia, particularly Indonesia, the political and social changes following the Reformasi era have opened space for more problematic religious representations. Horror films no longer portray clerics or religious teachers as *deus ex machina* as they did during the New Order era, but instead begin to show religious symbols that are fragile, imbalanced, or even powerless.<sup>5</sup> Devvy even finds a tendency toward desacralization emerging through scenes that diminish the authority of rituals, religious figures, or sacred symbols, shifting horror from religious narratives toward more transgressive and critical narratives.<sup>6</sup>

Although studies on horror and religion are growing rapidly, several gaps remain that have not been widely explored. First, Western horror research tends to emphasize Christian demonology and exorcism practices,<sup>7</sup> while Indonesian horror research highlights folklore, Islam, and local spirituality.<sup>8</sup> These two contexts are rarely

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<sup>5</sup> Amanda Veranita, "The Powerless Religion Reinterpretation of Religious Symbol in Contemporary Horror Films" (Universitas Gadjah Mada, 2021), <https://etd.repository.ugm.ac.id/penelitian/detail/197785>.

<sup>6</sup> Yohana Devvy, Theresia Intan, and Nanang Krisdinanto, "Desakralisasi Film Horor Indonesia Dalam Kajian Reception Analysis," *Desakralisasi Film Horror Indonesia Dalam Kajian Reception Analysis* 4, no. 1 (2020): 1–19.

<sup>7</sup> Alexander V. Pavlov, "The Conjuring': Invisible Fear, Theology of Horror, and Traditional Values," *Galactica Media: Journal of Media Studies* 7, no. 1 (March 2025): 251–65, <https://doi.org/10.46539/gmd.v7i1.615>; Timothy Beal, *Religion and Its Monsters*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003007302>; Richard Cavendish, *The Powers of Evil: In Western Religion, Magic and Folk Belief* (London: Routledge, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003363743>.

<sup>8</sup> Zainal Abidin, Wahyu Nova Riski, and Syamsul Barry, "Narrative Structure, Symbolic Meaning, and Cultural Expression in Contemporary Indonesian Horror Cinema. | EBSCOhost," June 1, 2025, 7:59, <https://doi.org/10.31763/viperarts.v7i1.17900>; Anas Ahmadi et al., "The Transformation of Islamic Identity behind the Screen: Indonesian Horror Films, 1980–2020," *Journal of Indonesian Islam* 19, no. 1 (June 2025): 188, <https://doi.org/10.15642/JIIS.2025.19.1.188-213>; "Religious, Ghost, and Spiritual Concepts of Society in Folklore Horror Film in Indonesia," accessed May 20, 2025,

brought together in a comparative framework, despite the importance of cross-cultural studies in understanding how religious fears are constructed differently according to the underlying cosmology. Second, semiotics research in horror studies remains divided between microanalysis (codes, symbols, characters) and macro discourse analysis (power, ideology, identity), as in Rachman.<sup>9</sup> There is no approach that combines the two simultaneously using Roland Barthes' semiotic model, which allows for a three-layered reading of meaning: denotation, connotation, and myth. Third, there has been no study that explicitly compares the construction of demons (Western) and jinn (Indonesian) as two supernatural figures that are different theologically, epistemologically, and ideologically, even though both play an important role in visualizing religious fears in their respective societies.

This gap is the reason why four films were chosen for this study: *The Exorcist*, *Hereditary*, *Qodrat*, and *Pengabdian Setan*. First, *The Exorcist* is a global icon in demonological horror and a significant milestone in the relationship between Christianity—especially Catholicism—and the representation of modern cinema.<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile, *Hereditary*, which combines modern occultism, demonic mythology, and criticism of family disintegration, offers a new form of contemporary demonology that no longer relies on traditional religious symbols.<sup>11</sup> These two films represent two critical eras of Western horror: the theological classical era and the nihilistic modern era.

Meanwhile, *Qodrat* represents a new development in Indonesian “Islamic horror,” placing *ruqyah* as an exorcism practice combined with

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[https://scholar.google.com/citations?view\\_op=view\\_citation&hl=id&user=LLKT1EYAAA&view\\_for\\_view=LLKT1EYAAA&view\\_as\\_of=UebtZR9Y7oC](https://scholar.google.com/citations?view_op=view_citation&hl=id&user=LLKT1EYAAA&view_for_view=LLKT1EYAAA&view_as_of=UebtZR9Y7oC).

<sup>9</sup> Rio Febriannur Rachman, “The Representation of Islamic Values in ‘Siksa Kubur’ Movie Through Foucauldian Discourse Analysis,” *Journal of Computer Science and Visual Communication Design* 9, no. 2 (December 2024): 519–28, <https://doi.org/10.55732/jikdiskomvis.v9i2.1449>.

<sup>10</sup> Laycock and Harrelson, *The Exorcist Effect*.

<sup>11</sup> Steve A. Wiggins, *Holy Horror: The Bible and Fear in Movies* (McFarland, 2018).

modern horror aesthetics.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, *Pengabdi Setan* presents cult-based horror and syncretic spirituality, while also showing symptoms of the desacralization of religious symbols, which has become a trend in horror films since 2010.<sup>13</sup> Thus, these four films are ideologically and historically significant, occupying strategic positions in the development of global and national horror discourse, which allows for a comprehensive comparative analysis.

Academically, this research is significant because it fosters interdisciplinary dialogue among religious studies, film studies, semiotics, and media studies. Horror offers a unique space for examining how religion is negotiated through mass-circulated audiovisual media. In Western tradition, horror functions as a critique, affirmation, and subversion of religious institutions.<sup>14</sup> In the Indonesian context, horror reflects changes in social structure, increased public religiosity, and tensions between traditional beliefs and modern Islam.<sup>15</sup> This research fills a gap by connecting these two traditions using Barthes' semiotic framework. Practically, this research provides a more critical understanding of how religious symbols are commodified by the culture industry, as well as how society forms views about the supernatural through the films it consumes.

Based on the research context and theoretical review described above, this study aims to investigate how Western and Indonesian horror films represent the relationship between religion, media, and collective fear in society. This study aims to examine how films portray religious symbols, spiritual rituals, and supernatural figures as cultural constructs that evoke fear, while also illuminating the dynamics of human relationships with the transcendent in a modern context. This

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<sup>12</sup> Rachman, "The Representation of Islamic Values in 'Siksa Kubur' Movie Through Foucauldian Discourse Analysis."

<sup>13</sup> Devvy, Intan, and Krisdinanto, "Desakralisasi Film Horror Indonesia Dalam Kajian Reception Analysis."

<sup>14</sup> Bruce David Forbes and Jeffrey H. Mahan, *Religion and Popular Culture in America, Third Edition* (Univ of California Press, 2017), 1-21.

<sup>15</sup> Anas Ahmadi et al., "The Transformation of Islamic Identity behind the Screen: Indonesian Horror Films, 1980-2020," *Journal of Indonesian Islam* 19, no. 1 (June 2025): 188-213, <https://doi.org/10.15642/JIIS.2025.19.1.188-213>.

question then directs this study to utilize Roland Barthes' semiotic model as an analytical tool to read the construction of religious signs in films, particularly the representation of demons in Western horror and jinn in Indonesian horror. This approach enables the study to examine how these signs operate through layers of denotation, connotation, and institutionalized myths in popular culture.

With this foundation, this study specifically aims to understand how horror films become a space for the production of religious meaning and an arena for the articulation of public fear; analyze the process of sign work through Barthes' denotation-connotation-myth model in the representation of demons and jinn; and identify and compare the constructions of religious fear that emerge in Western and Indonesian horror traditions. Through these objectives, this study aims to elucidate the ideologies and cultural values that underlie both representations, while also providing an overview of how media and religion interact in shaping the discourse of fear in the modern era.

The significance of this research lies in its methodological and theoretical contributions. By combining Barthes' semiotics and a cross-cultural comparative approach, this research presents an analytical model that can be applied to studies of horror, religion, and media in diverse contexts. This research also opens up a transnational discussion on how religion is produced, maintained, or destabilized through the film industry. In the Indonesian context, this study enriches the understanding of the relationship between media and Islam, particularly in the horror genre, which is increasingly influencing the public's imagination about jinn, *ruqyah*, and the supernatural world. In the Western context, this study critiques how Christian demonology is adapted, maintained, or even distorted by the modern film industry. Thus, this study makes both empirical and theoretical contributions, while also presenting a critical discourse on the politics of religious representation in the digital media era.

This study uses a qualitative-descriptive approach with Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis method to interpret the representation of religious fear in Western and Indonesian horror films. Barthes' framework was chosen because it is capable of explaining how films

produce meaning through three levels of signification: denotation (the literal meaning of signs), connotation (cultural and religious meanings), and myth (naturalized ideologies).<sup>16</sup> Thus, symbols such as the cross, exorcism prayers, or *ruqyah* verses are not only read as visual objects but as part of a cultural meaning construction that shapes society's perception of divine power and supernatural threats.<sup>17</sup> The research data includes visual scenes, dialogues, and symbolic elements from selected films, supported by semiotics literature, film studies, and media-religion studies.

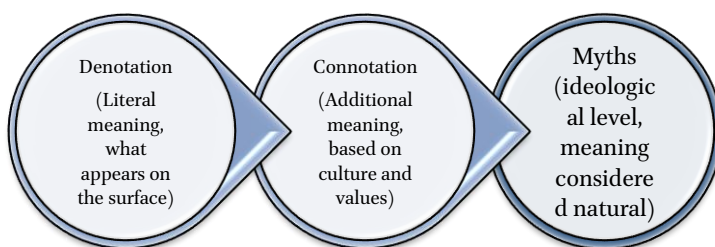


Figure 1 Semiotics approach

The analysis was conducted in three stages: (1) identifying religious and supernatural signs in the films, (2) interpreting the connotative meanings based on the cultural contexts of Western Christianity and local Indonesian Islam, and (3) revealing how these signs shape religious fear myths in the two cinematic traditions. The results of the analysis were then compared to identify patterns of similarity and difference in the representation of religious fear. The validity of the data was ensured through triangulation of sources and

<sup>16</sup> See Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977).

<sup>17</sup> Novan Ramadhan et al., "Analisis Semiotika Roland Barthes terhadap Representasi Kesakralan Tokoh Paranormal Ed dan Lorraine Warren pada Film *The Conjuring 2: The Enfield Poltergeist*," *Jurnal Ilmu Sosial Humaniora Indonesia* 4, no. 2 (2024): 215–35, <https://doi.org/10.52436/1.jishi.208>.

careful observation, thereby ensuring that the interpretations were consistent and academically accountable.

### **Horror Films as Representations of Religious Fear**

Horror films can be a medium for religious fear, focusing on supernatural entities as symbols of metaphysical evil. The *Exorcist* and *Hereditary*, as well as Indonesian horror films *Qodrat* and *Pengabdi Setan*, fall within the radar of such “religious fear”.<sup>18</sup> *The Exorcist*, directed by William Friedkin and released in 1973, is an adaptation of the novel by William Peter Blatty.<sup>19</sup> The story begins with the discovery of a statue of the demon Pazuzu by archaeologists in Iraq, which becomes a symbol of the evil that is to come. In Washington D.C., Regan MacNeil, a 12-year-old girl from a prominent family, begins exhibiting strange behavior such as speaking in strange voices, having nightmares, and displaying supernatural powers. Her mother, Chris MacNeil, initially seeks medical help, but doctors find no physical cause. Doctors and medical experts suggest an exorcism.

Chris then contacts Father Damien Karras, a priest who is also a psychiatrist and is experiencing a crisis of faith due to the death of his mother. Karras is skeptical but agrees to help after Regan displays extraordinary powers and aggressive attacks. The leader of the exorcism, Father Lankester Merrin, comes to assist. The exorcism was tense, and Merrin died of a heart attack during the battle with the evil spirit. Karras continued the spiritual battle alone and ultimately sacrificed himself to drive the demon out of Regan by jumping out of a window, freeing Regan from the devil’s influence. The film also explores themes of faith, suffering, and sacrifice.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Haruto Nakamura, “The Construction of Religious Symbolic Spaces and the Generation of Psychological Fear in The Conjuring Series,” *Art and Society* 3, no. 6 (December 2024): 8–17.

<sup>19</sup> *The Exorcist*, (Warner Bros., Hoya Productions, 1973), 2.

<sup>20</sup> Chris Flackett, “Finding Faith and Forgiveness: The Exorcist and Catholic Guilt,” *Film Obsessive*, January 27, 2025, <https://filmobsessive.com/film/film-analysis/finding-faith-and-forgiveness-the-exorcist-and-catholic-guilt/>.

*The Exorcist* is considered one of the classic horror films that raises the theme of possession and the battle of faith against evil powers. The exorcism scenes, the use of crosses, Latin prayers, and holy water build an atmosphere of widespread spiritual tension, making this film a strong icon of demon representation in Christian tradition. Culturally, the film highlights humanity's vulnerability to sin and temptation, as well as the crisis of faith, which is a profound conflict in modern Western society.<sup>21</sup> The lengthy production process and various incidents during filming created a myth that the film was "cursed." Its commercial success and critical acclaim have further cemented the film's status as a cultural icon, serving as a reference point for the classic horror genre.<sup>22</sup>

Ari Aster's film *Hereditary* (2018) brings demonic elements into a more complex and modern psychological realm.<sup>23</sup> The story begins with the death of their grandmother, Ellen, who had a complex relationship with her daughter, Annie. Ellen was the leader of an occult group that worshipped Paimon, the king of demons. The Graham family's life begins to shake after her death. Annie, a secretive miniature artist, lives with her husband, Steve, her eldest daughter, Charlie, who is autistic and enjoys making dolls, and her youngest son, Peter. Charlie is Ellen's favorite grandchild, but has a unique personality that sets her apart from other children. After Ellen's funeral, strange events began to occur in the family.

Annie had nightmares and saw strange things in the house, including dolls that moved by themselves. Charlie was also involved in a mysterious incident. One day, Charlie died tragically in an accident that severed his neck with an electric pole while he was with Peter. In the climax of the story, there is a scene where Paimon manages to take control of Peter's body. Annie, who tries to convince her son, ends up trapped in a miniature doll, a symbol of the hereditary curse that is

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<sup>21</sup> Amy C. Chambers, "Somewhere between Science and Superstition': Religious Outrage, Horrific Science, and *The Exorcist* (1973)," *History of the Human Sciences* 34, no. 5 (December 2021): 32–52, <https://doi.org/10.1177/09526951211004465>.

<sup>22</sup> Laycock and Harrelson, *The Exorcist Effect*.

<sup>23</sup> *Hereditary*, (PalmStar Media, Finch Entertainment, Windy Hill Pictures, 2018), 27.

difficult to break. The film concludes with Peter becoming a vessel for the evil spirit Paimon, marking the continuation of the curse and the dark power that has been exerted over the Graham family.<sup>24</sup>

This film explores family trauma and the manifestation of the demon Paimon through symbols of occultism and spirit summoning rituals. This approach combines metaphysical horror with criticism of spiritual decadence and religious identity uncertainty in the secular era, placing demons as symbols of a more complex and personal spiritual crisis, expressing religious fears within the framework of secularization and contemporary doubts about faith. The demon's identity in this film is constructed through ritual symbolism and spirit summoning, which evoke existential anxiety.<sup>25</sup>

In the Indonesian horror film *Qodrat* (2022), directed by Charles Gozali, a conflict arises between a *ruqyah* practitioner and supernatural beings that are exorcised through *ruqyah* verses and Islamic prayer rituals.<sup>26</sup> Ustaz Qodrat is an experienced exorcist who has helped many people expel jinn and demons. However, he suffers a tragic failure when performing *ruqyah* on his own son, Alif Al-Fatanah, who is possessed by a powerful jinn named Assuala, leading to his death. This incident left him traumatized and questioning his faith. Due to his negligence and trauma, *Qodrat* was imprisoned for three years, during which he was still haunted by supernatural forces. After his release, *Qodrat* returned to the Islamic boarding school where he had once studied in the village of Kahuripan.

The boarding school and village had become plagued by supernatural disturbances—mysterious deaths, crop failures, and increasingly rampant demonic possession among the villagers. *Qodrat* met Yasmin, a widow with two children, whose youngest son, Alif Amri, began to be possessed. *Qodrat* performed an exorcism to save

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<sup>24</sup> "Film Hereditary: Drama Keluarga Penuh Teror (Spoiler Alert!)," Asumsi, June 14, 2022, <https://asumsi.co/post/56293/film-hereditary-drama-keluarga-penuh-teror/>.

<sup>25</sup> *Hereditary* (2018): *Horor Fiktif Antara Delusi Dan Realita*, October 7, 2018, <https://www.duniasinema.com/2018/10/hereditary-horor-delusi-dan-realita.html>.

<sup>26</sup> *Qodrat*, (Magma Entertainment, Rapi Films, Ideosource Entertainment, 2023), 1h42m.

Alif Amri, while also fighting the demon Assuala who continued to interfere. The conflict escalates when *Qodrat* discovers that he is a religious school leader who has conspired with the devil for personal gain. *Qodrat* must fight not only against supernatural forces but also against betrayal from within the religious school in order to atone for his mistakes and restore peace to the village.<sup>27</sup>

As a representation of religious fear, *Qodrat* emphasizes that the source of horror is not merely jinn possessing human bodies, but the spiritual crisis experienced by the ustaz when his religious expertise clashes with personal trauma and guilt. The film visualizes *ruqyah* verses as symbols of divine intervention that attempt to reestablish moral order amid human fragility.<sup>28</sup> *Qodrat's* battle against Assuala depicts physical and ritual conflicts, a process of faith reconstruction, in which evil forces are portrayed as exploiting vulnerable social spaces—such as Islamic boarding schools infiltrated by ambition and spiritual corruption. Thus, *Qodrat* presents a uniquely Indonesian form of religious horror: metaphysical fear combined with social criticism, and an inner struggle that demonstrates that exorcism is a process of restoring human relations with God.

The film *Pengabdian Setan* (2017), directed by Joko Anwar, tells the story of Rini's family, who live in an old house inherited from their grandmother on the outskirts of Jakarta.<sup>29</sup> Mawarni, Rini's mother, who was once a singer, suffered from a mysterious illness for years and eventually passed away. After Mawarni's death, the family begins to be haunted by supernatural terrors, including the appearance of Mawarni's ghost, who wants to return. Rini and her siblings gradually discover that their mother was involved with a satanic cult in order to

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<sup>27</sup> Rieke Dinda Laila Tambunan, Khothibul Umam, and Herpin Nopiandi Khurosan, "Analisis Lima Dimensi Religius dalam Film *Qodrat* Karya Charles Gozali: Kajian Sosiologi Sastra," *Wicara: Jurnal Sastra, Bahasa, dan Budaya* 4, no. 1 (April 2025): 62–69.

<sup>28</sup> "Nilai Religius Pada Film *Qodrat* Karya Charles Gozali | PDF," Scribd, accessed November 21, 2025, <https://id.scribd.com/document/748343325/Nilai-Religius-Pada-Film-Qodrat-Karya-Charles-Gozali>.

<sup>29</sup> *Pengabdian Setan*, (Rapi Films, CJ Entertainment, 2017), 1h47m.

have children, and that their youngest child, Ian, is the incarnation of the devil who brings a curse and danger to the family.

Tension in the household escalated with the family members becoming possessed and experiencing supernatural disturbances, while the grandmother, who had preserved traditions and performed spiritual rituals, also died mysteriously, leaving the family in an increasingly precarious situation. Rini, as the eldest child, tried to uncover the dark secrets and protect her family from the evil forces that were coming. The film explores the spiritual conflict between formal religious beliefs and local mystical traditions, as well as the moral and social tensions that arise from confronting the supernatural's power.<sup>30</sup>

In *Pengabdian Setan*, the old house is not merely a horror setting, but a symbol of sacred-profane semiosis: as a transitional space between the real world and the supernatural realm, the home also becomes a field of moral and spiritual conflict. The sect's worship rituals and exorcisms depicted in the film reflect a cultural negotiation between local mystical traditions and modern rationality—a reality that represents the artistic manifestation of black magic and the moral consequences of supernatural pacts.<sup>31</sup> Religious symbols such as prayers, religious figures, and Islamic worship practices appear as spiritual defenses against evil forces in this film.

However, the film also shows the desacralization of religious figures and rituals—where religious figures can be defeated by demons—indicating that traditional sacredness is tested in modern horror narratives.<sup>32</sup> In addition, the film's spiritual conflict also contains a gender dimension, exploring ideas about the ideal woman, the curse of infertility, and the sect as an attempt to deconstruct the

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<sup>30</sup> Rieke Septiana et al., "Religiously Horror: Religious Elements in *Pengabdian Setan* (2017) and *Pengabdian Setan: Communion* (2022)," *Indonesian Journal of Islamic Communication* 7, no. 1 (June 2024): 83–104, <https://doi.org/10.35719/ijic.v7i1.2169>.

<sup>31</sup> Nadia et al., "Rituals of Banishment in Indonesia: Mysticism in the Film 'Pengabdian Setan,'" *Paradigma Lingua* 5, no. 1 (January 2025): 9–19.

<sup>32</sup> Devvy, Intan, and Krisdinanto, "Desakralisasi Film Horor Indonesia Dalam Kajian Reception Analysis."

concept of women in a patriarchal society. The representation of female ghosts in the film can also be read as a symbol of social patriarchy that connects gender identity and power relations in the supernatural realm.<sup>33</sup> Thus, the horror film *Pengabdi Setan* is not merely a medium for scaring audiences, but also for conveying profound social and religious criticism.

These films were selected because they represent the evolution of religious fear across cultures: in the West, demons are often positioned as symbols of secular spiritual crisis, while in Indonesia, jinn or local supernatural entities more often serve to reinforce narratives of communal proselytizing and religious conflict. For example, *Pengabdi Setan* combines elements of Islam and local beliefs in a religious horror narrative, creating a story that explores spiritual and moral conflicts.<sup>34</sup> Semiotic analysis also confirms that religious signs in religious horror have evolved; iconic symbols, indices, and religious symbols are preserved and deconstructed in the context of metaphysical fear.<sup>35</sup>

Furthermore, synthesized visual, audio, and narrative elements can express collective social and religious anxieties, providing evidence that contemporary Indonesian horror functions as a cultural text that reflects the identity and concerns of society.<sup>36</sup> Religious symbolism is also a prominent feature in local horror, with local religion and mysticism not merely serving as a background but as a significant force that shapes the conflict and meaning in the film.<sup>37</sup> In

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<sup>33</sup> Wawat Rahwati et al., "Pemaknaan Dekonstruksi Konsep Perempuan Ideal Dalam Film *Pengabdi Setan* (2017)," *Lingua: Jurnal Ilmiah* 16, no. 2 (October 2020): 39–58.

<sup>34</sup> Septiana et al., "Religiously Horror."

<sup>35</sup> Namira Choirani Fajri, "Ketakutan Dalam Iman: Analisis Peirce Pada Film Horor-Religi," *Prosiding Konferensi Linguistik Tahunan Atma Jaya (KOLITA)* 23, no. 23 (September 2025), <https://doi.org/10.25170/kolita.v23i23.7164>.

<sup>36</sup> Reny Rahmalina et al., "The Construction of Fear in Indonesian Contemporary Horror Films: A Multimodal Analysis," *Indonesian Journal of Applied Linguistics* 15, no. 1 (May 2025): 131–46, <https://doi.org/10.17509/ijal.v15i1.76915>.

<sup>37</sup> S. I. Kom Melati Kusuma Wardhani, "Simbolisme Agama Sebagai Protagonis Dalam Film Horor," *Profilm Jurnal Ilmiah Ilmu Perfilman Dan Pertelevision* 3, no. 1 (2024): 146–64, <https://doi.org/10.56849/jpf.v3i1.53>.

the social dimension, criticism from popular media reminds us that religious symbols risk being commodified and desacralized, rendering them mere aesthetic elements in the commercial horror industry.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, religious horror can be a tool for social discipline—religious fear on screen reflects social control through religious symbols.<sup>39</sup> This combination confirms that horror, as a religious and social medium, is an arena for cultural and belief negotiation in both the global and local popular spheres.

### **From Occultism to *Ruqyah*: A Semiotic Analysis of Horror Films**

The semiotic analysis in this study employs three levels of meaning, as proposed by Roland Barthes, namely denotation, connotation, and myth.<sup>40</sup> These three layers are used to interpret religious symbols and representations of fear in horror films that are the object of study. At the denotation stage, the analysis focuses on what is visually apparent on the screen, such as religious rituals, religious symbols, or the forms of supernatural entities. The connotation stage examines additional meanings that arise based on the cultural and religious contexts of each society. Meanwhile, myth reveals the ideology that is institutionalized through the repetition of symbols, so that specific religious messages appear natural and universal in popular culture.<sup>41</sup>

In *The Exorcist*, Regan MacNeil's possession becomes the main sign that drives the entire narrative. Denotatively, this film explicitly depicts Catholic exorcism rituals, which are rich in religious

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<sup>38</sup> Dhimas Anugrah -, "Menikmati Film Horor yang Laris di Indonesia," Kompas.id, February 8, 2025, <https://www.kompas.id/artikel/menikmati-film-horor-yang-laris-di-indonesia>.

<sup>39</sup> Muh Nur Rahmat Yasim and Muh Yahya, "Film Horor Agama di Indonesia, Kesalehan, dan Kesakralan Yang Terpinggirkan?," *Endogami: Jurnal Ilmiah Kajian Antropologi* 8, no. 1 (November 2024): 111–26.

<sup>40</sup> "Semiotika Roland Barthes - Landasan Teori," accessed November 21, 2025, <https://123dok.com/id/article/semiotika-roland-barthes-landasan-teori.10527811>.

<sup>41</sup> Mulyazir Mulyazir and Muhammad Fadhilah, "Konsep Semiotika Roland Barthes Dan Aplikasinya Terhadap Kajian Al-Qur'an," *Al-Fathanah* 3, nos. 1, April (September 2023), <https://doi.org/10.37598/al-fathanah.v3i1>.

symbolism, including crosses, holy water, prayer books, and Latin incantations. Regan's wild body, her inhuman deep voice, and her resistance to sacred symbols serve as visual markers of the confrontation between divine and evil forces.<sup>42</sup> However, on a connotative level, *the demon* that possesses Regan is interpreted as a representation of the spiritual crisis of Western society. Regan becomes a reflection of modern children who have lost their religious sensitivity due to the dominance of science and secularization. When scientists and doctors fail to explain the symptoms that occur, religion reemerges as the only way to understand the irrational, positioning *the Demon* as a collective reflection of society's guilt, alienation, and longing for the God they have marginalized.<sup>43</sup>

At the mythical level, *The Exorcist* works by naturalizing the belief that Catholic authority is the last bastion against evil.<sup>44</sup> Ideologically, the film reaffirms religious institutions, once considered obsolete by modernity, as a source of hope amid a crisis of meaning. This myth marks the West's nostalgia for "lost faith," selling fear that ultimately reaffirms the need for religious authority for morality and salvation.<sup>45</sup> Thus, the film is not merely a horror story, but an apologetic effort that uses *the Demon* as an allegory to demand that society return to its theological foundations.<sup>46</sup>

Four decades after *The Exorcist*, *Hereditary* presents a radical shift in the representation of religious fear. Denotatively, the film depicts occult rituals, spirit summoning, and worship of *the Demon*

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<sup>42</sup> Christopher C. H. Cook, *Hearing Voices, Demonic and Divine: Scientific and Theological Perspectives*, Wellcome Trust–Funded Monographs and Book Chapters (Oxon (UK): Routledge, 2019), <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK540477/>.

<sup>43</sup> Chambers, "Somewhere between Science and Superstition."

<sup>44</sup> William S. Chavez, "Modern Practice, Archaic Ritual: Catholic Exorcism in America," *Religions* 12, no. 10 (October 2021): 811, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12100811>.

<sup>45</sup> Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, Kirsteen Kim, and Amos Yong, eds., *Interdisciplinary and Religio-Cultural Discourses on a Spirit-Filled World: Loosing the Spirits* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137268990>.

<sup>46</sup> Joseph Laycock, *The Folk Piety of William Peter Blatty: The Exorcist in the Context of Secularization*, n.d.

Paimon.<sup>47</sup> The absence of Catholic exorcism—and the presence of dark spiritual practices—signifies a shift in crisis from religious institutions to the family psyche.<sup>48</sup> Empty faces, symbols of hidden worship, and dark rooms become markers that connote family dysfunction and generational trauma.<sup>49</sup> The demon Paimon becomes a symbol of existential wounds passed down through generations, where possession is no longer seen as an external invasion (demons from outside), but as an internal expression of unresolved spiritual and psychological destruction.<sup>50</sup>

At the mythical level, *Hereditary* reflects the ambivalent ideology of modernity, specifically the condition of a society that rejects formal religion yet compulsively seeks transcendent meaning. Here, demons are no longer enemies of God, but rather the logical consequence of humans who reject God.<sup>51</sup> The myth works as an allegory about the moral and spiritual destruction of secular humans who are uprooted from their religious roots.<sup>52</sup> Barthes calls this process *the “naturalization of the cultural”*—when loss of faith is no longer seen as a deviation, but as a condition inherent in modern humans. The fear in *Hereditary* is the fear of the emptiness of meaning itself, which is now filled by cruel supernatural forces.

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<sup>47</sup> “Mengungkap Iblis Paimon, Sosok di Balik Film ‘Hereditary’, Benarkah Punya Sisi Feminin? - National Geographic,” accessed November 21, 2025, <https://nationalgeographic.grid.id/read/134248257/mengungkap-iblis-paimon-sosok-di-balik-film-hereditary-benarkah-punya-sisi-feminin>.

<sup>48</sup> “BCM312: ‘The Monster Within’ – A Research Project of Possession and Generational Curses in Ari Aster’s *Hereditary*,” *Helia*, June 11, 2025, <https://heliasilva.wordpress.com/2025/06/11/bcm312-the-monster-within-a-research-project-of-possession-and-generational-curses-in-ari-asters-hereditary/>.

<sup>49</sup> Carlos Pineda, “Análisis semiótico de la representación de lo siniestro en el largometraje «*Hereditary*» (2018),” *Quórum Académico* 21, no. 2 (2024): 43–85.

<sup>50</sup> Justin Lee, “Demons of the Machine,” *First Things*, July 3, 2018, <https://firstthings.com/demons-of-the-machine/>.

<sup>51</sup> Alan Kelly, “The True Story Behind ‘Hereditary’s Occult Themes,” *Collider*, September 3, 2023, <https://collider.com/hereditary-movie-occult-true-story/>.

<sup>52</sup> Ratna Rezkhy Dwiastuty, “Analisis Genre Horror pada Film *Hereditary* (2018) dan *Midsommar* (2019),” *The Commertium* 5, no. 3 (August 2022): 191–206, <https://doi.org/10.26740/tc.v5i3.48991>.

Turning to the Indonesian context, horror films have a different semiotic function: they revitalize and affirm the authority of religion (Islam) amid concerns about the threat of modernity. *Qodrat* (2022) presents a very explicit religious discourse through an Islamic framework.<sup>53</sup> Denotatively, this film depicts scenes of possession, *ruqyah*, and prayers, as referenced in verses of the Qur'an.<sup>54</sup> The main character, an ustaz, functions as a mediator between spiritual forces and humans. Every symbol—prayer beads, prayer mats, recitation of verses—is a religious marker that affirms the presence of divine power.<sup>55</sup> On a connotative level, this film interprets possession as a reflection of moral trials and the erosion of collective faith among Muslims.<sup>56</sup> The jinn become a metaphor for anxiety over weak faith, rising materialism, and the disintegration of Islamic values.<sup>57</sup> *Ruqyah* serves as a symbol to restore balance between the individual and the community, as well as a process of reconciliation between modernity and spirituality.<sup>58</sup>

At the mythical level, *Qodrat* constructs an ideological narrative that Islam is a moral and epistemological fortress resistant to

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<sup>53</sup> Salsabila Arwani and Andi M. Faisal Bakti, "Analisis Komunikasi Islam dan Genre Horor-Religi dalam Film Qodrat," *ORASI: Jurnal Dakwah dan Komunikasi* 15, no. 1 (July 2024), <https://doi.org/10.24235/orasi.v15i1.17176>.

<sup>54</sup> Nur Annisa, Ihsan Nurmansyah, and Sherli Kurnia Oktaviana, "Living Qur'an Di Era Digital: Analisis Resepsi Estetis Dan Fungsional Atas Adegan Ruqyah Dalam Film Qodrat," *Mafatih* 4, no. 2 (2024): 107–26, <https://doi.org/10.24260/mafatih.v4i2.4148>.

<sup>55</sup> S. F. Namira and Corry Novrica Ap Sinaga, "Penyampaian Rasa Takut Dalam Film Qodrat Karya Charlez Ghozali," *Jurnal Psikotes* 1, no. 1 (May 2024): 1–11, <https://doi.org/10.59548/ps.vi1i.115>.

<sup>56</sup> Tambunan, Umam, and Khurosan, "Analisis Lima Dimensi Religius dalam Film Qodrat Karya Charles Gozali."

<sup>57</sup> Kevin Volkan, "The Jinn: Islam, Exorcism, and Psychology," *Journal of Social and Political Sciences* 6, no. 3 (September 2023), <https://doi.org/10.31014/aior.1991.06.03.425>.

<sup>58</sup> Christian Suhr, "Islamic Exorcism and the Cinema Fist: Analyzing Exorcism among Danish Muslims through the Prism of Film," *Contemporary Islam* 13, no. 1 (April 2019): 121–37, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11562-017-0394-6>.

modernity.<sup>59</sup> The film is set in a marginalized community plagued by explicit social problems—violence, moral decay, and crime. Semiotically, this social decay is connoted as the impact of the liberalization of values brought about by modernity. In other words, the film presents the view that modernity is a liberation of values that causes social and moral fragility.<sup>60</sup> The film’s narrative presents a conflict between spiritual forces and human rationality. The main character, Ustaz Qodrat, becomes frustrated and desperate when he fails to exorcise the jinn with *ruqyah* and tends to think logically about his destiny (human rationality). The film explicitly presents the failure of rationality (Ustaz Qodrat’s despair) as a condition that must be overcome. A complete solution can only be achieved through divine power that transcends human instrumental logic. This affirmation confirms the superiority of religious knowledge (epistemology) over secular knowledge.<sup>61</sup>

This film firmly asserts the belief that science and rationality cannot fully explain spiritual evil, so religion remains the highest source of authority.<sup>62</sup> Unlike *The Exorcist*, which is apologetic (defending threatened religion), *Qodrat* presents religion not as an institution that has lost its power, but as a force that is revitalized and strengthened through the media.<sup>63</sup> This myth works to reaffirm the “naturalness” of Islam’s position as a moral and social protector, making it a strong ideological response to secularization.

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<sup>59</sup> Dhama Suroyya, “Commodification and Desacralization of Religious Symbols in Indonesian Horror Movies,” *Indonesian Journal of Islamic Communication* 5, no. 1 (April 2022): 15–38, <https://doi.org/10.35719/ijic.v5i1.1816>.

<sup>60</sup> Ahmad Munirul Hakim, “Islam Dan Film Horor: Membentengi Individu Dengan Keimanan Dalam Film Qodrat,” *Journal of Religion and Film* 2, no. 1 (June 2023): 245–58, <https://doi.org/10.30631/jrf.v2i1.23>.

<sup>61</sup> Melati Kusuma Wardhani, “Simbolisme Agama Sebagai Protagonis Dalam Film Horor.”

<sup>62</sup> Tambunan, Umam, and Khurosan, “Analisis Lima Dimensi Religius dalam Film Qodrat Karya Charles Gozali.”

<sup>63</sup> Arwani and Bakti, “Analisis Komunikasi Islam dan Genre Horor-Religi dalam Film Qodrat.”

While *Pengabdi Setan* presents a more subtle and contextual form in depicting supernatural entities, it offers a narrative rich in signs and symbols that can be analyzed semiotically to explore the deeper meanings behind its horror and supernatural elements. Denotatively, the film shows the reality of Rini's family, who are trapped in a curse due to a dark pact between their mother, Mawarni, and a satanic cult.<sup>64</sup> The old, gloomy house, the black robes of the cult members, and the small tinkling bells serve as visual icons that mark the supernatural atmosphere and lurking threat.<sup>65</sup> The death of the grandmother and the possession of family members serve as indicators of the spiritual crisis that has struck, signifying moral decline and the collapse of traditional values that have long been the anchor of the family.

The connotations that emerge from these various elements depict a conflict between tradition and modernity, between formal Islam and the syncretic local *kejawen* beliefs.<sup>66</sup> Mawarni, as a mother figure who inspires terror, represents the disintegration of family ties and the moral implications of human choices that prioritize worldly ambitions over spiritual values.<sup>67</sup> Ian, the youngest child, is a symbol of the hereditary curse born of this dark compromise. The film thus raises a contemporary myth that reminds us that losing spiritual balance can lead to disaster and social destruction. The entire narrative and visuals of the film function as a modern myth that reinforces the role of religion and tradition in maintaining the social and spiritual harmony of Indonesian society.

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<sup>64</sup> Nadia et al., "Rituals of Banishment in Indonesia."

<sup>65</sup> Garcia Iktia, "Kajian Komparatif Historis Film 'Pengabdi Setan,'" *Jurnal Budaya Nusantara* 2, no. 1 (September 2018): 196–202, <https://doi.org/10.36456/JBN.vol2.no1.1712>.

<sup>66</sup> Hendy Yuliansyah et al., "Memvisualkan Yang Sakral: Simbolisme Keagamaan Dalam Representasi Hantu Dalam Film Horor Indonesia," *Offscreen* 4, no. 1 (July 2025), <https://doi.org/10.26887/os.v4i1.5857>.

<sup>67</sup> Niken Prawiranauli, Agusly Irawan Aritonang, and Megawati Wahjudianata, "Stereotipe Perempuan Indonesia Dalam Film Horor 'Pengabdi Setan,'" *Jurnal E-Komunikasi* 6, no. 2 (2018), <https://publication.petra.ac.id/index.php/ilmu-komunikasi/article/view/8311>.

To provide an overview of the initial analysis results for the four main films studied—*The Exorcist* (1973), *Hereditary* (2018), *Qodrat* (2022), and *Pengabdian Setan* (2017)—the following summary table summarizes the three layers of meaning:

<b>Films</b>	<b>denotation</b>	<b>Connotation</b>	<b>Myth</b>
<i>The Exorcist</i>	Catholic exorcism ritual (cross, holy water, Latin incantations) against <i>demonic</i> possession.	Spiritual crisis and alienation amid Western secularization that glorifies science.	Catholicism is often regarded as the last moral bastion against evil.
<i>Hereditary</i>	Occult rituals and the manifestation of the demon Paimon.	Hereditary trauma and psychological devastation due to the loss of transcendental sensitivity.	Demons as symbols of the moral and existential decay of humanity that rejects spirituality.
<i>Qodrat</i>	<i>Ruqyah</i> rituals and exorcism according to Islam.	Moral tests and the erosion of faith among Muslim communities	Islam is a spiritual force protecting morality and society.
<i>Pengabdian Setan</i>	The Ghost of the Mother and traditional supernatural entities ( <i>pocong</i> , <i>kuntilanak</i> ) resulting from sectarian agreements.	Ambition and rationality that reflect moral values and spiritual beliefs.	Religion/Tradition is the foundation for restoring harmony and the spiritual anchor of the family.

From these four films, it is evident that entities such as demons and jinn serve as cultural mirrors of humanity's relationship with the transcendent.<sup>68</sup> In Western films, demons represent the loss of faith and spiritual alienation that arise amid secularization.<sup>69</sup> The fear depicted is a fear of meaninglessness—humans who have lost God, then created “demons” as a reflection of their own emptiness.<sup>70</sup> In contrast, in Indonesian horror films, jinn serve as symbols of reconciliation; they are not merely threats, but also moral warnings for humans to return to religious values.<sup>71</sup>

When viewed through Barthes' framework,<sup>72</sup> religious horror films are ideological spaces where society renegotiates the position of religion in the modern world. In the West, horror myths serve as an attempt to revive lost faith.<sup>73</sup> In Indonesia, horror myths serve to preserve faith so that it is not lost.<sup>74</sup> This difference highlights how the media serves as both a channel of entertainment and a platform for the production of religious meaning.

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<sup>68</sup> Melati Kusuma Wardhani, “Simbolisme Agama Sebagai Protagonis Dalam Film Horor.”

<sup>69</sup> S. Jonathon O'Donnell, “Secularizing Demons: Fundamentalist Navigations in Religion and Secularity,” *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 51, no. 3 (August 2016), <https://doi.org/10.1111/zygo.12275>.

<sup>70</sup> Samantha Blue, *The Devil We Used to Know: Portrayals of the Devil in Media*, n.d., accessed November 22, 2025, [https://www.academia.edu/11366511/The\\_Devil\\_We\\_Used\\_to\\_Know\\_Portrayals\\_of\\_the\\_Devil\\_in\\_Media](https://www.academia.edu/11366511/The_Devil_We_Used_to_Know_Portrayals_of_the_Devil_in_Media).

<sup>71</sup> Fajri, “Ketakutan Dalam Iman.”

<sup>72</sup> Josh Heaps, “Roland Barthes and Film: Myth, Eroticism and Poetics, by Patrick Ffrench,” *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media*, no. 21 (August 2021): 213–18, <https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.21.16>.

<sup>73</sup> “View of Denotative and Connotative Meanings in The Truman Show: A Semiotic Analysis Based on Roland Barthes' Theory,” accessed November 22, 2025, <https://ojs.unikom.ac.id/index.php/mahadaya/article/view/16454/5144>.

<sup>74</sup> Mike Duran, “Religious Themes in Horror Films 2024,” *decompose*, December 27, 2024, <https://www.mikeduran.com/2024/12/27/religious-themes-in-horror-films-2024/>.

Thus, demons and jinn are not independent entities, but rather symbolic constructs that bear the traces of the ideologies, cultures, and psychologies of their respective societies. Horror films, through the mechanism of fear, become tools of spiritual reflection: they show how modern humans continue to search for God, even if it is through the darkest of paths—fear itself.

### **Reinterpreting Demons, Jinn, and Societal Fear through the Lens of Religion and Media**

The representation of demons in Western horror films and jinn in Indonesian horror films opens up a reflective space for understanding how societies produce, articulate, and manage their collective fears through popular media.<sup>75</sup> In the realm of religious and media studies, films serve as visual entertainment and symbolic media that integrate theological, cultural, and ideological dimensions.<sup>76</sup> Through Roland Barthes' semiotic approach, supernatural entities in horror films can be read as signs that work on three levels: denotation (literal meaning), connotation (cultural meaning), and myth (naturalized ideological meaning).<sup>77</sup> Thus, demons and jinn must be understood as supernatural figures and as cultural constructs that reflect the anxieties, moral values, and belief systems of society in the context of modernity.<sup>78</sup> Fear is not merely an individual emotion; it is a

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<sup>75</sup> "Horror Films: Reflections of Society's Deepest Fears and Cultural Anxieties | ASU News," October 28, 2024, <https://news.asu.edu/20241028-arts-humanities-and-education-horror-films-reflections-societys-deepest-fears-and-cultural>.

<sup>76</sup> Justito Adiprasetio, "Deconstructing Fear in Indonesian Cinema: Diachronic Analysis of Antagonist Representations in Half a Century of Indonesian Horror Films 1970-2020," *Cogent Arts & Humanities* 10, no. 2 (December 2023): 2268396, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311983.2023.2268396>.

<sup>77</sup> Metha Lestari, Oemar Madri Bafadhhal, and Safitri Elfandari, "Representasi Okultisme Dalam Film Horor Indonesia (Analisis Semiotika Roland Barthes Film Sewu Dino: The Movie)" (undergraduate, Sriwijaya University, 2024), [https://doi.org/10/RAMA\\_70201\\_07031182025024](https://doi.org/10/RAMA_70201_07031182025024).

<sup>78</sup> Barry Keith Grant, "Screams on Screens: Paradigms of Horror," *Loading...* 4, no. 6 (2010), <https://journals.sfu.ca/loading/index.php/loading/article/view/85>.

social construct shaped by historical experiences, religious values, moral crises, and struggles with identity.<sup>79</sup>

In the Western context, demons have long served as a moral metaphor within the Judeo-Christian tradition. They are positioned as the personification of sin and moral deviance, presenting the idea that violations of the divine order will open the door to the intervention of evil forces.<sup>80</sup> This representation found its cinematic form in films such as *The Exorcist*, which is often viewed as a cultural response to the increasing secularization and decline of religious institutional authority in the 20th century. When Pazuzu possesses Regan, the film depicts possession as a supernatural phenomenon, metaphorizing Christian society's anxiety about the loss of spiritual stability in the modern family.<sup>81</sup> Regan's body becomes the locus for a broader crisis: the tension between faith and rationality, between religious tradition and secular culture, and between church authority and individual autonomy.<sup>82</sup> On a mythical level, *The Exorcist* creates a narrative that salvation is only possible through a return to faith, making demons a catalyst for the religious nostalgia of a society that has lost its spiritual certainty.<sup>83</sup>

The film *Hereditary* reinforces this diagnosis by depicting demons as entities that operate through psychological and genealogical cracks in families.<sup>84</sup> In this film, evil does not come from outside, but arises from unresolved generational trauma. *The demon*

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<sup>79</sup> Tri Widyastuti Setyaningsih, "Rekreasi Ketakutan, Sebuah Kajian Menonton Film Horor di Masa Pasca Pandemi," *Imaji* 14, no. 1 (April 2023): 57–72, <https://doi.org/10.52290/i.v14i1.100>.

<sup>80</sup> O'Donnell, "Secularizing Demons."

<sup>81</sup> "The Philosophy of Horror: Or, Paradoxes of the Heart," Routledge & CRC Press, accessed November 22, 2025, <https://www.routledge.com/The-Philosophy-of-Horror-Or-Paradoxes-of-the-Heart/Carroll/p/book/9780415902168>.

<sup>82</sup> *Recreational Terror* (n.d.), accessed November 22, 2025, <https://sunypress.edu/Books/R/Recreational-Terror2>.

<sup>83</sup> Flackett, "Finding Faith and Forgiveness."

<sup>84</sup> Shafihatul Adib, "The Cinematography of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in *Hereditary* (2018)" (undergraduate, Universitas Islam Negeri Maulana Malik Ibrahim, 2025), <http://etheses.uin-malang.ac.id/77071/>.

Paimon symbolizes modern society's inability to maintain a stable moral structure when its religious foundations weaken.<sup>85</sup> At the connotative level, signs such as occult rituals depict family disintegration. In contrast, at the mythical level, this narrative normalizes the discourse that humanity's disconnection from spiritual traditions opens up space for existential emptiness.<sup>86</sup> Thus, demons in Western cinema become signs that express the tension between secular modernity and humanity's need for the transcendent—the fear of sin, moral failure, loss of meaning, or loss of God.<sup>87</sup>

Meanwhile, in the Indonesian context, the representation of jinn has a distinct character, as it is deeply rooted in Islamic cosmology and local traditions that have shaped the society's imagination for centuries.<sup>88</sup> Jinn do not merely represent individual sin, but more broadly reflect the relationship between humans, communities, and supernatural forces in a social structure that still maintains a belief in the unseen world.<sup>89</sup> Phenomena such as *pesugihan* (black magic to gain wealth), *tumbal* (human sacrifice), or agreements with supernatural beings become cultural mechanisms for understanding economic uncertainty and social dynamics that cannot always be explained through modern rationality.<sup>90</sup> Narratives such as “*warung pesugihan*” (magic shops), “*tuyul penglaris*” (magic creatures that bring good luck), or “*persekutuan gaib*” (supernatural alliances) are ways in

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<sup>85</sup> Daniel Wolfe, “The Horror of Inheritance in Hereditary,” *Medium*, April 30, 2025, <https://medium.com/@danieldomonicwolfe/the-horror-of-inheritance-in-hereditary-96e76f7bb585>.

<sup>86</sup> Kelly, “The True Story Behind ‘Hereditary’s Occult Themes.”

<sup>87</sup> O'Donnell, “Secularizing Demons.”

<sup>88</sup> Kankan- Kasmana et al., “The Belief in the Existence of Supernatural Beings in the Community of Moslem Sundanese,” *Journal of Arts and Humanities* 7, no. 4 (April 2018): 11–21, <https://doi.org/10.18533/journal.v7i4.1375>.

<sup>89</sup> Dandung Budi Yuwono, “Transformasi Spiritual Masyarakat Jawa Kontemporer: Eksistensi Dan Makna Ritual Di Parangkusumo,” *Panangkaran: Jurnal Penelitian Agama Dan Masyarakat* 7, no. 1 (June 2023): 31–57, <https://doi.org/10.14421/panangkaran.v7i1.3142>.

<sup>90</sup> Benedicta Pahar, “Study of the Potential of the Myth of Pesugihan as a Tourist Attraction in Pesarean Gunung Kawi, Malang Regency,” *Jurnal Kepariwisata* 24, no. 1 (March 2025): 129–36, <https://doi.org/10.52352/jpar.v24i1.1762>.

which communities explain the rapid and uneven growth of local capitalism—and at the same time serve as moral devices to remind people of the ethical limits of pursuing worldly gains.<sup>91</sup>

The film *Qodrat* articulates this idea through the battle between the ustaz and the jinn that possess the community.<sup>92</sup> *Ruqyah* rituals, recitations of holy verses, and the resolution of spiritual conflicts are part of the narrative that religion offers protection to communities facing social change.<sup>93</sup> Within Barthes' framework, the jinn in *Qodrat* operates as a sign that, at the connotative level, affirms Islamic values as a moral solution. In contrast, at the mythical level, it reinforces the discourse that social stability can only be achieved through obedience to religious teachings.<sup>94</sup> The film thus produces a myth about “religious order” that neutralizes anxiety about modernity.<sup>95</sup>

*Pengabdi Setan* offers a different variation by showing jinn and satanic cults as direct consequences of worldly ambitions and family fragmentation. Mawarni's pact with supernatural entities is symbolic of the moral crisis that arises when materialistic orientations replace traditional and religious values.<sup>96</sup> This representation highlights that in Indonesian cosmology, the fear of jinn is both eschatological and

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<sup>91</sup> Ahmad Syamsul Muarif, “Mitos Sebagai Upaya Masyarakat Indigenous dalam Menjaga Kelestarian Alam (Studi Mitos di Alas Purwo Desa Kalipahit Banyuwangi)” (masters, UIN Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta, 2021), <https://digilib.uin-suka.ac.id/id/eprint/49650/>.

<sup>92</sup> Arwani and Bakti, “Analisis Komunikasi Islam dan Genre Horor-Religi dalam Film Qodrat.”

<sup>93</sup> Nur Annisa, *Resepsi Estetis dan Fungsional atas Adegan Ruqyah dalam Film Qodrat*, IAIN Pontianak, 2023, <https://digilib.iainptk.ac.id/xmlui/handle/123456789/3930>.

<sup>94</sup> Izharul Haq, “Seni Film Sebagai Sarana Dakwah Dalam Perspektif Al-Qur'an (Analisis Film 5 Pm Dengan Teori Semiotika Roland Barthes)” (masters, Institut PTIQ Jakarta, 2023), <https://repository.ptiq.ac.id/id/eprint/1247/>.

<sup>95</sup> Mas'ud Muhammadiyah, *Dynamics of Interreligious Relations in Indonesian Film Works: A Semiotic and Narrative Analysis*, Kamara, 2025, <https://repositori.unibos.ac.id/handle/123456789/4661>.

<sup>96</sup> Kiki Maulfi Hardiyanti Hardiyanti S., “Pesan Dakwah Dalam Film Horor Indonesia: Studi Kasus Pada Film Pengabdi Setan Menggunakan Model Analisis Semiotika Roland Barthes” (undergraduate, UIN Sunan Ampel Surabaya, 2021), <http://digilib.uinsa.ac.id/46934/>.

social, arising when family solidarity weakens, when communities fail to fulfill their moral responsibilities, or when individuals take shortcuts to achieve worldly goals.<sup>97</sup> At the mythical level, jinn become symbols of the destruction of communal values and the fragility of family foundations in society.<sup>98</sup>

The central question then is: why are religious horror films with themes of demons and jinn so popular and consistently attract audiences?<sup>99</sup> In our reflection, several reasons explain this phenomenon. First, because religious horror touches on the most universal fears: fear of supernatural powers, the uncertainty of life, and loss of control.<sup>100</sup> Demons and jinn are forms that can be “personified” from abstract anxieties.<sup>101</sup> Horror works as a catharsis that helps people negotiate their deepest anxieties without actually experiencing them.<sup>102</sup>

Second, religious horror films provide a safe zone for people to experience moral and spiritual fear.<sup>103</sup> In real life, facing the temptation of sin, a crisis of faith, or supernatural threats is certainly very difficult. However, in films, viewers can experience these things without risk. They can scream, feel tense, and then return to the real world feeling

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<sup>97</sup> Dimas Lazuardy Abdullah, “Analisis Semiotika Makna Islam Dalam Film Pengabdian Setan” (bachelorThesis, Fakultas Ilmu dakwah dan Ilmu Komunikasi Universitas Islam Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta, 2018), <https://repository.uinjkt.ac.id/dspace/handle/123456789/42481>.

<sup>98</sup> Abdul Khoiri, “Simbol-simbol Keagamaan dalam Film Pengabdian Setan.”

<sup>99</sup> Holly Meyer, “Why Religious Themes Make for Such Good Horror Movies,” AP News, November 16, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/hugh-grant-heretic-movie-horror-genre-religion-films-1252f80811e8c5e6cdc6610d3d87b070>.

<sup>100</sup> Bryan Stone, “The Sanctification of Fear: Images of the Religious in Horror Films,” *Journal of Religion and Film*, January 1, 2001, [https://www.academia.edu/115913854/The\\_sanctification\\_of\\_fear\\_Images\\_of\\_the\\_religious\\_in\\_horror\\_films](https://www.academia.edu/115913854/The_sanctification_of_fear_Images_of_the_religious_in_horror_films).

<sup>101</sup> “Exorcisms, Cults and Demons: Where Religion and Horror Films Meet,” *ABC News*, August 7, 2025, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-08-08/religion-christianity-horror-movie-film-psychology/105586080>.

<sup>102</sup> Hardiyanti S., “Pesan Dakwah Dalam Film Horor Indonesia.”

<sup>103</sup> Devvy, Intan, and Krisdinanto, “Desakralisasi Film Horor Indonesia Dalam Kajian Reception Analysis.”

relieved.<sup>104</sup> Horor bekerja sebagai katarsis yang membantu masyarakat menegosiasikan kecemasan terdalam mereka tanpa benar-benar mengalaminya.<sup>105</sup>

Third, religious horror films reinforce existing beliefs within the culture.<sup>106</sup> For Indonesians, representations of jinn, *ruqyah*, or pesugihan connect viewers to a local cosmology that is still alive today.<sup>107</sup> For Western audiences, films such as *The Exorcist* or *Hereditary* provide emotional proof that demonology and the concept of possession remain relevant even as church institutions weaken.<sup>108</sup> In other words, religious horror films reflect and reinforce societal beliefs.

Fourth, religious horror films reveal the most contextual collective fears for each culture. In the West, the greatest fear is no longer curses or occult rituals, but spiritual emptiness: the loss of faith, the breakdown of families, and secularization that robs people of their sense of purpose.<sup>109</sup> Demons become symbols of this anxiety. In Indonesia, fears are more related to moral threats and social disintegration.<sup>110</sup> Jinn appear as symbols warning against deviating from values, greed, or making pacts with dark forces for worldly gain.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Yasim and Yahya, "Film Horor Agama di Indonesia, Kesalahan, dan Kesakralan Yang Terpinggirkan?"

<sup>105</sup> Fajri, "Ketakutan Dalam Iman."

<sup>106</sup> Annisa Kamalia, *Mitos Kerajaan Jin di Alas Purwo Kecamatan Tegaldimo Kabupaten Banyuwangi*, Fakultas Keguruan Dan Ilmu Pendidikan, August 7, 2023, <https://repository.unej.ac.id/xmlui/handle/123456789/127145>.

<sup>107</sup> Afidah, "Okultisme Dalam Al-Qur'an."

<sup>108</sup> Laycock and Harrelson, *The Exorcist Effect*.

<sup>109</sup> Veranita, "*The Powerless Religion Reinterpretation of Religious Symbol in Contemporary Horror Films.*"

<sup>110</sup> Paskah Paskalis Aditya Putra Way, Intan Leliana, and Laurensia Retno Hariatiningsih, "Representasi Simbol Religi Dalam Film Kuasa Gelap (Analisis Semiotika Roland Barthes)," *Jurnal Intelek Insan Cendikia* 2, no. 10 (October 2025): 17388–94.

<sup>111</sup> Suroyya, "Commodification and Desacralization of Religious Symbols in Indonesian Horror Movies."

Fifth, religious horror films also operate as a form of commodification of fear.<sup>112</sup> Religious symbols, such as crosses, *ruqyah* verses, exorcism prayers, or summoning rituals, represent theological meanings and become visual commodities marketed as cinematic sensations. In the modern media world, religion and commercialism are closely intertwined to the extent that horror films can function as a “new church” or “symbolic mosque” where people experience spirituality in an aesthetic, emotional, and controlled form. This shows how religious fear has become part of the culture industry.<sup>113</sup>

In our reflection, the relationship between religion and media in religious horror films is ambivalent.<sup>114</sup> On the one hand, films can serve as a medium for spiritual revitalization, as they remind society of moral values and the existence of transcendent powers.<sup>115</sup> On the other hand, films can also turn religion into a visual commodity that is consumed for sensation.<sup>116</sup> This creates a condition in which religious fear is both a spiritual experience and a product of the entertainment industry.<sup>117</sup> In this context, Barthes helps explain how religious myths are reproduced by the media, making them appear as natural truths,<sup>118</sup> even though they are, in fact, strategic cultural constructions.

As a researcher, our position is that of a critical reader who sees demons and jinn not merely as supernatural figures, but as symbols representing the anxieties of modern society. Using Barthes’ semiotics,

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<sup>112</sup> Suroyya, “Commodification and Desacralization of Religious Symbols in Indonesian Horror Movies.”

<sup>113</sup> Noppy Angreani and Widayatmoko Widayatmoko, “Komodifikasi Dan Pengaburan Makna Simbol Religius Agama Katolik Dalam Film The Conjuring II,” *Koneksi* 1, no. 2 (2017): 507–12, <https://doi.org/10.24912/kn.v1i2.2032>.

<sup>114</sup> Stewart M. Hoover, *Religion in the Media Age* (Taylor & Francis, 2025).

<sup>115</sup> “The Mediatization of Religion A Theory of the Media as an Agent of Religious Change,” *SciSpace - Paper, Intellect*, June 1, 2008, 6:9–26, [https://doi.org/10.1386/NL.6.1.9\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/NL.6.1.9_1).

<sup>116</sup> Dwi Aryo Penangsang and Irwa Rochimah Zarkasi, “Komodifikasi Nilai Islam di Media Sosial: Analisis Semiotika Roland Barthes pada Reels Instagram @duha.muslimwear,” *JOISCOM (Journal of Islamic Communication)* 6, no. 2 (November 2025): 52–62, <https://doi.org/10.36085/joiscom.v6i2.8980>.

<sup>117</sup> Birgit Meyer, *Aesthetic Formations: Media, Religion, and the Senses* (Springer, 2009).

<sup>118</sup> Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Hill and Wang, 1972).

we understand these representations as part of a process of mythologization that helps society reorganize the meaning of life amid cultural change.<sup>119</sup> Demons represent the spiritual crisis of the West born of secularization,<sup>120</sup> while jinn represent the moral tensions in Indonesia triggered by the clash between tradition, religion, and modernity.<sup>121</sup> Religious horror films, in this context, serve as an arena where society seeks to rediscover its moral orientation, as well as a medium that harnesses fear as a form of cultural energy.<sup>122</sup>

Ultimately, the presence of demons and jinn in religious horror films highlights the differences between Western and Indonesian cosmologies, while also revealing modern humans' need for narratives that can help them navigate the uncertainties of their time. Both demons and jinn are symbolic signs that affirm that fear is an integral part of the social construction of society. Thus, religious horror films tell supernatural stories and map the anxieties, hopes, and moral dynamics of the society that consumes them.

### Concluding Remarks

This study contributes by offering a comparative analysis that combines Roland Barthes' semiotic perspective with religious and media studies to reinterpret the representation of demons and jinn in religious horror films. Unlike previous studies that generally focus on the theological, narrative, or psychological impact of films, this study emphasizes the function of both as cultural signs that map modern anxieties within two different cosmologies: the secular West and religious Indonesia. Thus, this research fills a gap in the literature on how media shape, distribute, and naturalize religious fears through the process of mythologization, while also affirming the position of religious horror films as an arena for the production of meaning and the dynamics of contemporary society's morality.

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<sup>119</sup> Barthes, *Mythologies*.

<sup>120</sup> O'Donnell, "Secularizing Demons."

<sup>121</sup> Hardiyanti S., "Pesan Dakwah Dalam Film Horor Indonesia."

<sup>122</sup> Fajri, "Ketakutan Dalam Iman."

In Western horror—such as *The Exorcist* and *Hereditary*—demons operate as symbols of a crisis of faith and spiritual uncertainty arising from the process of secularization. The denotation of exorcism rituals, the connotation of religious trauma, and myths about church authority show how horror becomes a means of renegotiating the position of religion in modern society. Demons in the West are not merely supernatural entities, but representations of existential anxiety that place religion in a tense relationship with science, modernity, and rationality. In contrast, in Indonesian horror—such as *Qodrat* and *Pengabdian Setan*—jinn appear as figures that unite Islamic beliefs, local traditions, and social criticism. *Ruqyah*, Islamic boarding schools, and local syncretic rituals show that religious fear is constructed through the relationship between religious authority, society, and communal morality. Through layers of myth, these films construct narratives about the fragility of religious social spaces and the potential for abuse of spiritual power. Indonesian horror reinforces religiosity, reveals internal problems such as spiritual corruption and the desacralization of Islamic symbols. A comparison of the two traditions reveals that representations of demons and jinn stem from distinct religious cosmologies, yet both position horror as a platform for the production of religious meaning in the modern media era. Western demonology emphasizes the conflict between faith and secularism, while jinn in Indonesian cinema focus on the conflict in the relationship between religion, popular culture, and social structures.

Theoretically, this study demonstrates that Barthes' semiotics is effective in deconstructing religious meaning in horror films, as it enables analysis of signs from the visual level to the ideological level. Methodologically, this study offers a cross-cultural comparative analysis model that can be used to examine the representation of religion in popular media. In practical terms, this study encourages a critical reading of the commodification of religious symbols in the horror industry and the role of film in shaping public perceptions of the supernatural world. Further research could expand the object to digital horror, OTT series, or interactive media to examine how platform transformations also influence the representation of religious

fear. An interdisciplinary approach—combining the study of religion, media, psychology, and digital anthropology—will enrich our understanding of the new dynamics between religion, popular culture, and the production of fear in the global era.

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