

The Consequences of Cultural and Ideological Representation in Film

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ABSTRACT:

Representation of cultural and ideological propaganda is a complex undertaking when compared to merely trying to represent informative messages. This article aims to examine the consequences of cultural and ideological propaganda as represented in film. The author employed a qualitative approach using data from several articles on film and combined them with personal experiences watching films with an audience and interacting with filmmakers. The study is focused on the perspective of lay audiences unfamiliar with semiotic theories. Conclusions were derived from five consequences, namely: (1) the emergence of audience perception different to the intention of the filmmaker; (2) the emergence of different audience behavior as a result of differing interpretation they derived from the representation portrayed; (3) the impact of the irreversible character of communication, i.e. the messages represented in the film; (4) the emergence of the assumption that filmmaking is inherently ethically problematic; and (5) the impression the film's entire content is blurred because of multiple messages represented.

Keywords: Representation, Propaganda, Culture, Ideology, Film

ABSTRAK:

Merepresentasikan propaganda budaya dan ideologi memiliki tingkat kerumitan yang lebih tinggi dibandingkan dengan sekedar merepresentasikan pesan informatif. Artikel ini bertujuan untuk menelaah konsekuensi dari propaganda budaya dan ideologi jika direpresentasikan di dalam film. Pembahasannya bersifat kualitatif menggunakan data dari beberapa artikel film ditambah pengalaman penulis dalam berinteraksi dengan para pembuat film, serta pengalaman menonton film bersama masyarakat. Kajiannya lebih dititikberatkan pada perspektif penonton awam yang tidak mengetahui teori semiotika. Hasilnya disimpulkan melalui lima konsekuensi, yaitu: (1) munculnya persepsi penonton yang berbeda dari yang diharapkan; (2) munculnya perbedaan perilaku penonton akibat dari perbedaan interpretasi terhadap representasi yang diterimanya; (3) dampak dari sifat komunikasi, yaitu pesan yang direpresentasikan dalam film bersifat *irreversible*; (4) munculnya anggapan bahwa dalam proses pembuatan film ada problem etika; dan (5) kesan totalitas isi film menjadi kabur akibat pesan ganda yang direpresentasikan.

Kata kunci: Representasi, Propaganda, Budaya, Ideologi, Film

INTRODUCTION

Film is a cultural and artistic product which functions as a medium of communication. All the references perused concurred that film is an effective medium for conveying messages. Moreover, film can also be used for propaganda purposes (Mirnawati 1), (Asri 6). Propaganda is the act of conveying a message in the form of making a call or an outright solicitation. Dody Pradana Eryanto says propaganda is a deliberate and systematic means to control public opinion according to the behest of the propaganda maker (Eryanto 3).

Because of this role and capacity, film is often used for cultural and ideological propaganda purposes by certain filmmakers. The movies, *Transformers* (2007), or *Rambo* (1982), for example, represent the prowess of the United States of America as part of a massive cultural and even ideological propaganda endeavor (Eryanto 5). Similarly, the film *Merah Putih* (2009), represents the importance of paying homage to one's homeland, which can be construed as ideological propaganda for Indonesians (Akbar 6). Other films represent political struggle (Mirnawati 4), or cultural and ideological struggle, such as the film *Sultan Agung* (2018) (Prasetya 3–4).

Representation is the process of mounting messages for conveyance to the public. These messages are usually packaged in the form of images, sound, color, movement in film as warranted according to the interests and the intention of the effort (Manesah 4–5). The form selected for representation determines whether the messages are effective when conveyed.

The signs represented which become the meaning of the message will be perused by the receiver, in this case the audience, who will read them in multifarious ways. In the study of film, the methodology for reading these signs usually adopt the science of semiotics. Semiotics is the science of reading signs (Ambarini & Umayu 32–34). There are several theories which can be used to study film semiotics, among them Roland Barthes's (Agustina 1e 5) and John Fiske's theories (Fatima 9).

The issue is whether film audiences understand the science of semiotics and employ it to read the signs in the movies they watch. If not, what occurs? Would the viewer understand the signs according to the filmmaker's intention? Or do viewers derive other meanings from the signs they read? What are the consequences of this? How does one grapple with the situation, especially in films produced for cultural and ideological propagandic purposes?

These are engaging questions to examine and dissect at length using deep comprehension. Nevertheless, this article only limits its argument to qualitative description using theoretical study of a select number of film articles related to representation of cultural and ideological propaganda and based on the writer's personal experience with lay film viewers. The target was to examine cultural and ideological propaganda represented in film.

Studies on cultural representation conducted by the researchers reached the conclusion that culture, cultural diplomacy, and nationhood values, based on the individual researcher's comprehension was in general adequately portrayed (Christina & Yudhi, 2017), (Rahardjo, 2016), (Puspasari 2019), (Manesah 2016), and (Fatima 2019). But what construes the category of cultural propaganda is not as clear cut.

The same goes for ideological propaganda. The several studies conducted by these researchers showed that ideological representation in the films investigated were adequately portrayed (Eryanto 2015), (Akbar 2017), and (Mirnawati 2019). But whether the ideological representation fulfilled the extent of the propaganda and was effective is debatable.

These studies, both of cultural and of ideological representation, are mainly the opinion of the researcher and were conducted based on the theory of semiotics. For example, Puspasari in 2019 researched cultural representation in the film *Salawaku* (2016) using techniques of analysis derived from Edgar H. Schein (Puspasari 5). Another example is an analysis of public behavior representation in film by Rionaldo Herwento in 2014 who based his research on the Roland Barthes model (Herwendo 5). Now, how would these films be read by a lay public who knew nothing about cultural and ideological semiotics representation in a movie they are watching?

Having said that, this article will also provide some analysis on discussions made by audiences who had never delved into semiotics theory on par with this writer. The discussion will look at the consequences of representation of struggle, cultural propaganda, and ideological propaganda with analysis that will focus more on a lay audience's perspective resulting in subjective interpretation of the film's content.

Consequences of Representation of Struggle in Film

Struggle can be defined as an effort to fight for something desired. In everyday life, struggle can take many forms and work on many levels. Students struggle to attain good grades. Graduates struggle to get a job. Wayfarers struggle to survive. Heroes struggle to

wrest freedom, uphold an ideology or something they believe in. By levels of struggle, we mean gradations of complexity and impact fostered by the struggle in question. The more difficult the struggle conducted and the larger its impact on life, the higher the grade of the struggle.

In film, this gradation of levels also applies. In the first instance, there are films depicting an individual's struggle for a better life, as described by Manesah in his analysis of the film *Anak Sasada* (2011) (Manesah 1). Secondly, there is the struggle to uphold civil rights, such as the movement for women's equality, as analyzed by Christina in the film *Kartini* (Christina & Yudhi 6). In this description, the gradation of the struggle is more complex when compared to the first example.

Thirdly, there are films depicting struggle at a higher grade because of the struggle's larger impact, namely a struggle for an ideology and the general greater good of society, among others as described in his study of ideological struggle by Prasetya in the film *Sultan Agung* (2018) (Prasetya 1), political propaganda by Mirnawati (Mirnawati 1). and the issue of ethics by Budi Wibawa (Wibawa 1).

Inherent in representation of a struggle in film has consequences. Struggles of higher complexity require more complicated representation. As a result, potentially there exists a wide gap between the representation message intended by the filmmaker and the interpretation derived by the audience, probably resulting in the film's failure to achieve its original aim. The writer's personal interaction with filmmakers showed that they seldom give much thought to this specific issue.

Consequences of Cultural and Ideological Propaganda in Film

The notion of propaganda in day-to-day life is not much different to propaganda in film, namely a systematic effort to influence other parties to follow directives to achieve a condition as desired by the propagandist. Mahmudi discusses that propaganda contains the elements for influencing public opinion, emotional manipulation, and garnering support or repudiation (Mahmudi 4).

Meanwhile, systematic effort in propaganda is a series of techniques employed to create the three elements of influencing public opinion, manipulating emotions, and garnering support or repudiation (Mahmudi 4). For example, Mirnawati, in dissecting representation of propaganda in film, employs the seven techniques generally used by scholars of propaganda

films, namely Name Calling, Glittering Generalities, Transfer, Testimonial, Palin Folks, Card Stacking, and Band Wagon (Mirnawati 5). Indeed, these seven techniques are the veritable tools for makers of propaganda films. With them, propaganda filmmakers endeavor to create a space in the audience's subconscious for the messages they convey to be properly digested wholly and non-conditionally.

Propaganda in film derives many benefits from this, because aside from the seven techniques being fully in the hands of the filmmaker, the space for dialogue is also a construct in the film through the framing of a specific viewpoint for the audience's gaze and combined with narrative and cinematography. This framing is what makes film different from everyday reality, making it possible to separate the logic of filmic space with that of reality space (Pratiwi 6).

On the other hand, a perfect combination of narrative and cinematic elements could also take a film into reality space (Elizabeth 13). Yet, if the mix is imperfect, the propaganda will fail. Pratiwi, who dissected the movie *Roma* (2018) with a deep focus and long take analysis, concluded that *Roma* failed to elevate the idea of realism, because the film's hidden agenda packaged in esthetically pleasing and well-handled cinematic techniques was not coupled with appropriate ideological content in the narration (Pratiwi 11).

Failing to represent propaganda could result in the very failure of the propagandic mission itself. Particularly in the matter of cultural and ideological propaganda -- or if one may add, for instance, touting religious belief -- the consequences will be even more burdensome and sensitive-laden. The propagandic representation would result in several consequences, namely, firstly, the emergence of differing perceptions. While trying to mold audience perception through cognitive manipulation, instead the audience attains another, different perception. Indeed, among the audience itself, the separate perceptions of the individual viewers could create perceptions that differ from the connotative meaning each person absorbed because connotative meaning is subjective, and each viewer would only deal in connotative, and not denotative, meaning (Rahardjo 6–7). As a result, the film becomes debatable.

Further, the filmmaker has no way to seek clarification each time his or her film is viewed. Obviously, nobody is on site to help provide further information regarding the correct perception for viewer comprehension. An example of the rise of a separate perception is described by Galeh Eka Prasetya when analyzing the film *Sultan Agung: Tahta*,

Perjuangan, dan Cinta (2018). The analysis focused on the role of conflict in the construct of the main character (Prasetya 2). Observing the film's title, the main character constructed and touted as the hero is obviously Sultan Agung. Yet in analysis, Prasetya came to another conclusion. The hero characteristics were imbued in Sultan Agung, but could also be detected in other characters, such as the female fighter, Lembayung, and Kelana. The construction of various conflicts gave Prasetya the impression that Lembayung and Kelana also espoused the major characteristics of hero and savior besides the Sultan Agung character (Prasetya 25). In the article, Prasetya did not mention whether confirmation of this view was sought from *Sultan Agung's* filmmakers.

Still on *Sultan Agung* (2018), this writer had a similar take, in the sense of the emergence of a perception different to the film's representation. Coincidentally, this writer had opportunity to make review of the movie when its duration was still over three hours with the producer, director, and crew. The writer's perception, among others, was derived from the sequence where Sultan Agung says harsh words to the Tumenggung Notoprojo character.

In this dialog, Sultan Agung states that the Dutch company, VOC, is a group of colonizers, should never be taken into cooperation nor negotiation, and instead should be warred against. The nation of Mataran needs to fight them. Meanwhile, Tumenggung Notoprojo has a different opinion. Says Tumenggung Notoprojo, if VOC offers aid to build bridges, roads, rice barns, and things of benefit to the people of Mataram, then why not. Sultan Agung is enraged, and grabs Tumenggung Notoprojo by the throat while venting violent disagreement.

To this writer, this dialog encompasses a complex topic. It tries to describe the political ideology of a nation. Meanwhile, the dialog is represented through an imbalanced power relationship. Sultan Agung is king, while Notoprojo is a mere *tumenggung* (regent). Predictably, the king is the obvious the winner in the debate. This sequence is rife for misinterpretation. Pratiwi is of the opinion the representation of imbalanced power relations could undermine the characters causing them to hold unclear positions (Pratiwi 11). Mataram wages war against VOC, and Mataram loses. In the last portion of the film, we see several women keening for their deceased husbands, and little children who lost their fathers in the war. At the movie's end, the Sultan Agung character revives the learning center where he trained and studied as a boy and turns it into a center for art and culture.

The perception attained by this writer was, in consequence of his decision to take the political ideology route enjoined by his sense of power, the lives of the women and children of Mataram were detrimentally affected, also the life of Sultan Agung himself. If this was the perception intended, then this writer deems the movie propagandic ideology to caution people against taking a similar stance to Sultan Agung's. The writer asked the movie's director if indeed this was the message the movie aimed for, and he responded that it was off target. The movie's sequences as described did not convey the message that the writer perceived.

Secondly, changed behavior is another consequence of a differing interpretation an audience attains from a film's key message. This is when the filmmaker touting the propagandic mission to change audience behavior with the seven techniques or through mere portrayal of certain facts, get an audience that instead shows behavior opposite to that intended. The impact could be antagonism, criticism, hostility, or a rebuttal towards the mission touted by the propaganda, both only in certain portions or towards the entire film. This often happens to Indonesian movies, such as the film *Lima* (2018), *Kucumbu Tubuh Indahku* (2018), and children's films, say, *Naura & Geng Juara* (2017). A "mere portrayal of certain facts" in propaganda is acceptable so long as the facts are true and endorse the propagandic mission. Mahmudi says, at the representation level for propaganda, historical context that does not enhance the mission, or decreases its importance, should not be portrayed (Mahmudi 13).

Thirdly, the impact of communication characteristics. Because film is a communication medium (Herwendo 2), and communication is irreversible (Mukarom 45), a consequence is for messages represented in film being irreversible. In effect, once the message or messages are conveyed in the film to its audience, the messages cannot be taken back. The elements that have impacted audience behavior cannot be reversed to its previous condition, even though, let's say, the filmmaker makes a correction. This is of greater consequence compared to mere perceptual differences or behavioral change, because the impact is on a mass level.

Fourthly, the consequence of the matter of ethics. This occurs when propaganda is pushed vehemently and sporadically by the filmmaker. Budi Wibawa calls it "justifying manipulation" (Wibawa 39). This is damaging to the value of freedom of expression. The ethical problem can occur at the reality level, the level of representation of reality, and at the ideological level. At reality level, the ethical issue is related among others to the credibility of

the source. Budi Wibawa used the examples of employing a fake resource person or an authentic resource person but in illegal ways (Wibawa 39). The ethical issue at the representation level can be in the form of tendentious manipulation in the reconstruction. At the ideological level, the ethics issue can be in the form of a deliberate effort to shift the ideas and the direction of the doctrine or norms conveyed (Hidayatullah 12).

Fifth, the film's entire content becomes blurred and unclear whether the film falls under cultural propaganda, ideological propaganda, or neither of the two. This occurs when the propaganda is weak, there are too many embellishments to the story, or when additional intrigue in the narrative turns out more enticing compared to the main message. This could be why articles discussing struggle, and cultural or ideologic propaganda in Indonesian cinema are few. It could also be that writers make conclusions the films they are analyzing are, say, cultural, while the filmmaker says it's not.

Take the movie *Salawaku* (2016), dissected by Puspasari in relation to cultural representation (Puspasari 1) as portraying Maluku's natural beauty and local culinary items. The film, which falls into a road movie genre, is considered favorably by Puspasari as a work that represents culture well. Yet looking at the film in its entirety, it is difficult to determine which category it falls into: is it a movie portraying a struggle, a promotion for crocodiles, or is it cultural propaganda? The major stumbling block is the embellishment alongside the main story, an insertion of a love story and even an out-of-wedlock pregnancy.

In this case, no faultfinding is made towards the filmmaker, neither is the audience faulted for arriving at a different perception. It is simply the availability of choices and people making one. Nonetheless, any choice made gives rise to consequences. This confusion in category, whether a film is cultural or ideological propaganda, is also observed in other films, say, *Kartini* (2017) or *Ketika Bung di Ende* (2014). When this writer showed these two films and watched them with an audience, several members of the audience were disappointed with the level of character portrayed in the film.

In general, before the screening, the viewers had already formed in their minds certain ideas of Kartini and Sukarno being outstanding characters. As they watched, the portrayals depicted the two to be lesser characters. Internal conflict ensued. There arose a viewpoint – almost as if to comfort themselves in their wish not to diminish the heroic characters embedded in their minds – the two movies were merely a tale in the life journey of Kartini,

and mere stories of the joys and sorrows of Soekarno's exile in Ende. The audience reaction was a consequence of the film's content in its entirety.

Of these five consequences, we can deduce that failure of propagandic representation in film not only impacts the viewers but will also backfire on the filmmaker. Impacts felt by a filmmaker include social punishment by the public which can hack away at their credibility, legitimacy, and reputation, the core mainstays so carefully tended to by filmmakers. Thus, any such possible consequence should be diminished or totally abolished in anticipation. How should they do this? Obviously by determining a clear-cut direction of what main message or propaganda is to be constructed, determining the right balance between the main topic and the add-on "embellishments" while employing the right mix of the best in narrative and cinematic strengths to bolster the main propaganda line, and to always side with the audience so that each representation and ideology is derived from careful weighing up of details in order for each consequence to stay firmly in control.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the writer wishes to argue that propagandic representation could give rise to at least five consequences, namely: One, the emergence of audience perception that could be different to that intended; Two, the emergence of different audience behavior as a result of differing interpretation to the representation they absorbed; Three, the impact of a communication characteristic, which is that messages represented in film are irreversible; Four, the emergence of perception that filmmaking contains ethical issues; And, five, the impression that a film in entirety becomes blurred when multiple messaging is apparent in the representation.

These potential consequences can be diminished or deleted entirely by: (1) determining a clear direction for the main struggle or propaganda line being constructed; (2) determining balanced mix between the main topic and add-on "embellishments"; (3) employing a mix of the best of narrative and cinematic strengths to bolster the main propaganda line; and, (4) always siding with the audience so that each representation and ideology is derived from careful weighing up of details in order for each consequence to stay firmly in control.

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