

Proceedings from the Document Academy

Volume 7
Issue 1 *Proceedings from the 2020 Annual
Meeting of the Document Academy*

Article 5

2020

Seeing Indonesian Ghost Films through Document Theory

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Recommended Citation

Suprayitno, –; Fitriani, Dian Novita; Kamil, Rusdan; and Rahmi, – (2020) "Seeing Indonesian Ghost Films through Document Theory," *Proceedings from the Document Academy*. Vol. 7 : Iss. 1 , Article 5.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.35492/docam/7/1/5>

Available at: <https://ideaexchange.uakron.edu/docam/vol7/iss1/5>

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Seeing Indonesian Ghost Films through Document Theory

Cover Page Footnote

The authors thank the anonymous referee for their constructive comments to improve the article. This work was supported in part by the Kappa Sigma Kappa Indonesia (KSKI). Any opinions, findings, and conclusions described here are the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the sponsors.

Introduction

Hantu, the Bahasa Indonesia (Indonesian language) word for ghosts, are portrayed as the incarnation of monstrous or evil souls wishing to harm humans (Amin et al., 2017). Most modern Indonesians still believe in ghosts, as suggested by a growing number of ghost films in recent years. For example, one of the ghost films in Indonesia titled *Pengabdian Setan* (“Satan’s Slaves”) that has been watched by 4.2 million moviegoers was using gender (e.g., the fertility of women), occupation (e.g., the profession of artists), and religion (e.g., the role of religious leaders) as conservative narrative symbols.

As a preliminary study, the authors began by collecting the titles of 320 ghost film in Bahasa Indonesia that have been made and can be differentiated according to each culture, custom, and religion, ranging from the 1970s until the present. By using word clouds, we found the weights of 730 words from the 320 titles. The most frequent words were: *hantu* (ghost, $n=35$); *pocong* (ghost, $n=26$); *setan* (devil, $n=18$); *rumah* (house, $n=16$); *kuntilanak* (a malicious spirit from a woman who died whilst pregnant, $n=14$); *malam* (night, $n=10$); *perawan* (virgin, $n=9$); *mati* (die, $n=7$); *suster* (nanny, $n=7$); and *arwah* (spirit, $n=6$).

Those examples of words suggest that ghost films in Indonesia exhibit a symbolic bond between ghosts and traditional myths. For example, 1) a *pocong* or “shroud ghost” is an Indonesian ghost that is said to be the soul of a dead person trapped in its shroud, and 2) *kuntilanak* is a carnivorous female vampiric ghost in Indonesian mythology, said to be the spirit of a woman who died in childbirth. Stories about *pocong* and *kuntilanak* were mostly passed down by our parents and repeatedly told the next generation with the same formula: something scary with their respective characteristics. These two examples illustrate that contemporary notions of ghosts are drawn from Indonesian myth.

The authors identified that previous studies on ghost films as documents were from the fields of cinematography, culture, and film criticism (Meliala and Bezaleel, 2016; Amin et al., 2017), and they have not been examined through the lens of document theory. This paper aims to understand ghost films in Indonesia through document theory concepts such as materiality, productivity, and fixity. This paper also considers ghost films as documents through Foucault’s concept of panopticism. This paper is an exploratory and kaleidoscopic look at a topic that the authors hope to explore further in future work.

Materiality

With regard to ghost films in Indonesia as documents, there is a relationship between the physical or material film media and the concept of the ghost itself as a discourse. Even the abstract concept of ghosts depends on the materiality of the

document. As stated by Buckland (2016), “a document is some entity considered by someone as signifying something. It has to be a physical, material entity. One can discuss a text or a work in an abstract sense, but texts and works can exist as documents only in some physical manifestation.”

The material characteristics are related to the concept of the statement in Foucault’s view, which deals with discourse (Wood, 2003). Material and discursive formations have a material impact, too. The reproduction and circulation of this document occur because the statement or document is real, has material aspects, and has the physical potential to circulate among readers. Conversely, readers can manipulate, use, transform, exchange, combine, compile, and even destroy them (Foucault, 1970).

Productivity

The first discussion on productivity regarding primary and secondary documents was broached by Briet (1951). She described antelopes in zoos as primary documents, while sound recordings, photographs, and catalogs were secondary. In Briet’s view, documents and objects have hierarchical differences because documents will always refer to recorded objects, whereas Otlet’s view (1934), rooted in positivist thinking, assumes no difference between documents and objects. After all, documents are a direct representation of an object, and from this, they obtain their value or strength. The evidence from the object and the document is equivalent. Roux (2016), who builds on her work on Guattari and Deleuze, also argues document productivity with the analogy of a rhizome, in which between the first document and the second document, the second document and the third, and so on, is a rhizome that loops back into the previous documents based on the view of Briet’s hierarchical documents.

However, document creation always requires informational components, i.e., docs and docemes, and thus the documentation process has been conceptualized as the creation and use of information (Gorichanaz, 2017). Films include many docs and docemes that filmmakers use to inform and evoke the experience and feelings of the audience when watching a film. For example, the pleasure, sadness, romance, and the idea of the past generated in the audience depending on the film’s genre. Horror films are deliberately created to evoke some creepy, gripping experiences and paranoia, some viewers experience this when watching the film, and others feel it up to a few days after watching the film (Gorichanaz and Latham, 2016). Some docemes and docs that are not limited to visual media are experienced in the form of a tense atmosphere deliberately evoked by lights suddenly turning on and off, blood, and audio such as the sound of bells and screams or dogs howling at night.

Producing a gripping documentary experience while watching a film is an example of how documents provide evidence that is not related to empirical or socio-cultural discourse but personal experience because humans bring some of our past experiences and knowledge in the form of semantic capital (Floridi, 2018) when dealing with current documents. This creates the power relations possessed by documents that can make the audience experience the feeling of being watched. Many Indonesian horror film plots have a line of resistance to be free from the power of fear caused by external forces such as ghosts in various ways that create internal conditions within themselves so that they do not feel any supervision or feelings of excessive haunting. This is in line with Scriver et al. (2020), who found that frightening fiction allows audiences to practice effective coping strategies that can be beneficial in real-world situations. This is also what we can see in our documentary life today, in which many things monitor our lives without our knowledge and cannot be separated from the practice of documentary surveillance.

When in public, CCTV records our every leisure activity, and every tweet we deliver on Twitter produces digital traces until our online searches are recorded and used by third parties such as Google, Amazon, and Facebook, which Zubbof (2019) calls surveillance capitalism. These are two examples of how documentary practices perpetuate various forms of surveillance. Surveillance is not always adverse but can be interpreted positively and reduce the feeling of being watched by producing a better document experience; we can live peacefully with surveillance. When watching a horror film, the feeling of being haunted by various documents makes the audience feel scared; however, that is what the audience seeks in the plot and visualization of a horror story. This is what causes the feeling of being watched or haunted, and as long as it has no real impact, it is both terrifying and good.

Fixity

Returning to the ghost films mentioned above, films employing the imagery of *pocong* and *kuntilanak* have focused on the characteristics of each type of ghost ever since film was invented. In document theory, this is called fixity. Fixity is a document's ability to tell the same thing repeatedly in different times and spaces. Also, documents must have the ability to make copies from time to time, known as replicability. It can be concluded that documents must be able to maintain their physical form to convey their content from time to time (Levy, 1994; Narayan, 2015). Ghost films can be fixed in various media, such as DVD, VCD, LPs, and even celluloid film. Ghost films that manifest in these different formats will convey the same content from one viewing to next. Additionally, the film can also be copied, either the same media or different media, without changing the content.

The content conveyed in the ghost film copy remains the same as the original ghost film.

Levy (1994) then discusses the tension between fixity and fluidity. The tension between the two arises due to the increasing use of digital technology. The development of digital technology has led to a shift from fixed paper documents to fluid digital documents. During its development, horror film production developed by utilizing digital technology. From the explanation of the table above, ghost films as digital documents in their development do not necessarily have the characteristics that have been mentioned. The properties of ghost films as digital documents are open to further research.

Referring to the previous understanding of the fixity documents, digital products such as ghost films cannot be considered documents. However, Levy (1994) reveals that this arises from a misperception of the nature of documents. He argues that all documents, regardless of the media used, are fixed at certain times and fluid at other times. He explained that technology does not bring about cultural changes, and the need for fixity is a basic human need, so digital technology also supports the aspect of fixity. The development of fixity and fluidity was also discussed by Latham (2016), who gave rise to a new concept, namely floating fixity and its relation to authenticity. Using document phenomenology (Gorichanaz and Latham, 2016), Latham tries to analyze the concept of floating fixity, especially in museum institutions. This paper's conclusion reveals that fixity and fluidity continue to interact and trade places in space and time and affect authenticity. This paper also raises questions that open up opportunities for further research. In the context of this paper, the concepts of fixity, fluidity, floating fixity, and authenticity become an opportunity for further research to analyze ghost films as documents.

Panopticism

Recent research in psychology by Scrivner et al. (2020), a study of film fans who watched horror films during the COVID-19 pandemic, found that watching horror films helped viewers control their emotions during the pandemic. This was attributed to morbid curiosity, which has previously been associated with horror media use. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the researchers also tested whether the trait of morbid curiosity was associated with pandemic preparedness and psychological resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic. This effect was even more significant in "prepper" genre films such as alien or zombie invasion stories.

Drawing from Foucault's (1970) panopticon concept, we found that perpetuating the power from which people have unconsciously been mentally controlled is a kind of panopticism. The Foucauldian concept of the panopticon is often employed in digital forms of surveillance, a more complex mode of

watching. The panopticon metaphor emphasizes the role of gaze, surveillance, and visibility in the new forms of power relations that emerged in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This design allowed a small number of those in authority to watch a large number of individuals. Thus, the power relations incipient in panoptic surveillance is therefore not merely repressive. They also produce specific modes and practices of selfhood and embodiment, especially when they watch ghost films.

On the view that documents function as panopticons, ghost films provide power and will “discipline” people because these ghost stories can be haunting and frightening. Thus, the panopticon metaphor in ghost films emphasizes the internalization of external surveillance rationales so that people have accepted these rationales as part of the self-practices because they can never be sure whether hidden others are watching them (Lupton, 2016).

Conclusion

When we refer to Otlet’s (1934) opinion, objects are considered “documents” if we are informed by observing them. Briet (1951) added that a document is “any physical or symbolic sign, preserved or recorded, intended to represent, reconstruct, or demonstrate a physical or conceptual phenomenon.” The results discuss ghost films’ material aspects as documents with informative material regardless of the film’s genre, based on document theory (Otlet, 1934; Briet, 1951). Our findings also show productivity and fixity; for example, ghost films are *creatio ex materia*, as information creation and use are the processes by which ghost films are created (Gorichanaz, 2017) and have the ability to tell the same story over different places and times (Levy, 1994; Narayan, 2015). For instance, ghost types such as *pocong* and *kuntilanak* indicate the concept of ghosts that passed down by previous Indonesian ancestors.

This study does not discuss recent efforts to perpetuate those memories through the film, but rather the film as a material is essential to analyze through document theory. In terms of productivity, ghost films have the added value of releasing ghosts as materials, triggering the human imagination and our ability to provide evidence of changing epistemic perspectives over space and time. In terms of fixity, our study opens opportunities for further research, such as fluidity, floating fixity, authenticity, and other aspects to analyze ghost films as (digital) documents. As an additional result, drawing from Foucault’s (2002) panopticon concept, ghost films as documents are examples of how documents have a paranoiac and self-monitoring effect, especially for viewers who have the same cultural background as raised in the film, which in turn creates as a panopticon. Panopticism is also a scary transaction of information objects with personal information that creates experienced documents (Gorichanaz and Latham, 2016).

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