

The Semiotics of Horror Props in the Film *Rambut Kafan* and Their Relevance to Theatre Creation

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ABSTRACT

The development of Indonesian horror films over the past decade demonstrates a strong tendency toward the use of visual props as constructors of atmosphere and meaning. The film *Rambut Kafan* consistently employs long hair, burial shrouds, and ritual objects as key horror signs. This study aims to analyze the semiotic meanings of horror props in *Rambut Kafan* using Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic approach and to explore their potential as inspiration for theatrical artistic creation. The novelty of this research lies in mapping the system of horror prop signs from film into the context of artistic transformation in theater, rather than merely interpreting visual meanings within the film medium. This qualitative research analyzes selected scenes that prominently feature the main horror props. The findings indicate that these props function as icons, indices, and symbols representing death, trauma, and culturally liminal spaces. The practical implications of this study suggest that horror props from film can be transformed into metaphorical, immersive, and multisensory theatrical elements, thereby enriching visual creation strategies in contemporary theater practice.

keyword : horror semiotics, film props, peircean semiotics, visual symbolism, contemporary theatre

INTRODUCTION

The last decade of Indonesian horror films has witnessed a remarkable evolution in aesthetic and narrative methods, notably in the way visual elements are treated. Previous horror movies depended on abrupt visual shocks, jump scares and overt otherworldly appearances to generate anxiety. In contrast Indonesian horror cinema today is more concerned with the construction of atmosphere by means of symbols, signs and props of cultural

significance. Horror props are no longer simply decorative or additional but work as intricate sign systems that actively impact the development of the narrative, the emotional tension and the interpretation of the viewer. This is a move towards a more mature type of horror, where the fear is layered through the meaning, instead of just the immediate visual effect.

Previous studies have shown that the aesthetic of horror in Indonesia is closely related to the use of symbols of death,

spirituality, and local cultural activities, such as burial ceremonies, ancestor cults, and mythological stories based on local traditions. These cultural connections make visual props in horror films are rich with contextual and semiotic meanings as they work at the same time in iconic, indexical and symbolic levels (Setiawan, 2020; Widhana, 2021). Long hair and ceremonial implements in holy areas, funeral shrouds, and other objects are those that trigger communal memories and cultural concerns, where horror might be made not via the strange monstrous but through the familiar. Thus, props serve as narrative mediators between cinematic representation and socio-cultural experience.

In the performing arts, especially in contemporary theatre, visibility and stage props also have a major function in the construction of dramaturgy and spectator perception. In the semiotics of the stage, things on stage are not passive accessories but active signs, their placement, transformation and interaction with performers and space all contributing to the production of meaning. Props can be in the form of psychological states, abstract ideas, symbolic settings and special cultural relationships that are not limited to function only (Pratiwi, 2019). However, this same semiotic basis does not stop most theatre studies from still focusing on the inner symbolic logic of stage objects, treating theatre as an autonomous system, without much attention being paid to the visual and aesthetic origins of the film media.

This phenomenon becomes increasingly problematic in contemporary artistic practice, as borders between media are flexible and theatrical creativity often borrows from cinematic vocabulary. Cinema, especially genre cinema such as horror, provides a rich repository of visual signs and atmospheric tactics that can be reinterpreted and transmuted in live performance contexts. But the translation of filmic visual cues, particularly horror props, into theatrical materiality and dramaturgical structure is hardly explored by historians.

The film *Rambut Kafan* is an especially useful object of study because of its persistent and planned use of long hair, burial shrouds and ritual artifacts as dominating terror cues imbued with cultural and psychological meaning. These props are not static qualities or simple markers of genre but rather interact dynamically within the story to create dramatic tension, sustain suspense, and externalize the characters' inner anguish and unresolved pasts. These objects are repeated and transformed throughout the film, thus positioning them as key semiotic tools that influence interpretation by the spectator. However, although the visual language is rich, academic works that expressly study *Rambut Kafan*, especially from the perspective of artistic transition into theatre, are rather sparse.

The gap addressed in this study lies in the limited attention given to how semiotic analyses of horror props in film may inform creative practices in theatre production. Existing studies have primarily focused either on interpreting visual meanings within cinematic texts or on examining the symbolic functions of props in theatrical contexts as separate domains of inquiry. Consequently,

there remains limited understanding of how meanings associated with props may be explored across different artistic media. This study therefore examines the potential of horror props to be understood as semiotic resources that can be reinterpreted and adapted within theatre production. Such an approach may provide insights into how meanings are recontextualized through changes in spectatorship, spatial arrangements, temporality, and material presence.

By positioning framing props as cross-media sign systems, this research carves out a bridge between Indonesian horror cinema studies and contemporary theater creation. This research is intended to find out the main horror props in *Rambut Kafan*, analyze their semiotics meanings through Charles Sanders Peirce's triadic model of icon, index, and symbol, and to propose the potential transformation of the horror props as the conceptual and aesthetic inspiration for theatrical artistic creation. In this way, it is hoped that the research will not only expand the semiotic debate in film and theatre studies, but also provide practical insights for theatre practitioners. Insights such as these could assist in the creation of performance methods that are local, immersive and culturally relevant, responding to modern Indonesian audiences and changing visual sensibilities.

METHOD

The present research is qualitative in nature and uses semiotic theory of Charles Sanders Peirce as the main analytical framework. The qualitative approach is

ideal for this research because the inquiry concentrate on the interpretation of meanings, symbols and cultural significance encoded in visual aspects rather than the measurement of measurable factors (Hidayat, R., Jaeni, J., & Fussalam, Y. E., 2026). Semiotic analysis provides a way to analyze how horror meanings are produced using visual cues, and how these meanings function within certain cultural and narrative settings. Peirce's triadic paradigm of icon, index and symbol is particularly beneficial in exposing the deep relationships between visual form, referential association and culturally learnt meaning in horror props.

This study uses the principal horror props that exist throughout the film *Rambut Kafan* as the unit of analysis, including long hair, burial shrouds, and ritual implements. These props are conceived not only as material things within the film frame, but as visual sign systems that help to generate horror atmosphere, narrative suspense and emotional resonance. Each prop is considered as a semiotic entity, the meaning of which is produced by its repetition, modification and interaction with characters, space and cinematic methods like as framing, lighting and movement.

Scene selection was purposively sampled to ensure that the data evaluated were related to the research aims. The criteria for selection were: (1) scenes where horror props are presented as dominant and recurrent, meaning their narrative and symbolic importance; (2) scenes where props play a significant role in the development of dramatic conflict, psychological tension or mood construction; (3) scenes showing clear interactions between props, characters and visual space, so that an analysis of meaning production through

relational dynamics can be conducted instead of isolated imagery. The sequences chosen fulfill these requirements since they are reflective of the general patterns of signifying of horror in the film and are deep enough to allow for semiotic interpretation.

Data gathering involved rigorous visual observation and recording of the selected scenes. This included watching the entire film several times, noting crucial points, taking stills and making thorough descriptive notes of the way the horror objects looked, their position, movement and how they were used in context. The documenting approach was focused on preserving the visual aspects that matter for semiotic reading, like spatial composition, proximity to the characters and the temporal presence of the props in distinct narrative moments.

Data analysis was the application of Peirce's link between icons, indices and symbols to each identified prop inside its individual scene. At the iconic level, the investigation was concerned with visual similarities and sensory properties of the props such texture, shape and color. At the indexical level the analysis was focused on causal or associative linkages, for example, how props indicate death, trauma or supernatural presence through proximity, repetition or narrative consequence. The investigation addressed the meanings which are culturally produced and symbolically based on Indonesian beliefs, rituals and collective memory. This multi-layered approach of analysis is meant to unpack how horror props act as multi-

dimensional indicators rather than discrete visual stimuli.

Within this semiotic-qualitative frame, the researchers position themselves as interpretive analysts engaging with the data through contextual and culturally sensitive readings. The analysis does not claim to be objective or universal, but it does recognize the importance of cultural knowledge, artistic sensibility and theoretical basis in the interpretation of visual signs. The process always reinforced our interpretations with evidence from the scene, references to theory and cross-comparisons of props and their purposes in different narrative points to increase the analytical rigour.

The final stage of the analysis relates the results of the semiotic interpretation to the context of theatrical creation. At this stage, cinematic sign systems are examined in relation to their potential adaptation into theatrical practices, taking into account differences in medium, materiality, spatiality, and audience engagement. The analysis is intended to explore how meanings associated with horror props in film may be translated into theatrical elements such as stage properties, visual metaphors, and dramaturgical devices. Through this process, the study seeks not only to interpret semiotic meanings but also to consider their possible relevance for creative practices in contemporary Indonesian theatre. In this respect, semiotic analysis is approached as a framework that may contribute to both interpretive understanding and creative exploration.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION



Figure 1. Representation of long hair as a horror sign
(Source: Screenshot from *Rambut Kafan*, 2025)

The analysis of *Rambut Kafan* reveals that horror objects are a recurring and constant indicator system, visually important and structurally integral in the film. The narrative construction and visual design are precisely orchestrated to sustain atmospheric tension, manipulate the audience's perception and communicate key thematic concepts of mortality, memory, guilt and unresolved spiritual disquiet. The props are set. Such motifs are repeated in different scenes to create a visual grammar of terror, which allows viewers to recognise patterns, to anticipate dangers and to feel dread as a gradual build-up of meaning, rather than as an immediate reaction.

Important visual elements that contribute to the film's horror atmosphere and narrative suspense include ceremonial artifacts, funeral shrouds, and long hair. These props do not function independently but rather constitute a unified semiotic network that acts relationally across several scenarios. The horror of the film is grounded in culturally specific symbolic systems by a complex system of indicators reinforced by the meanings of the objects

through repetition, variation, and contextual placement.

One of the most conspicuous and persistent signs of horror in the image is the length of the hair. At the archetypal level it is startlingly like human hair, but its length, blackness and texture are beyond normal proportions, making it an instant anomaly. On an indexical level, hair appearing in silent spaces, dimly lit interiors or transitional spaces such as corridors, thresholds and private chambers evokes invisible creatures or spiritual unrest. The hair's abrupt emergence is frequently associated with periods of emotional fragility in the story, thereby creating a connection between the prop and mental and emotional instability.

Hair that covers the face or grows to an unnatural length down to the floor adds to the sense of absent identity and visual confusion, making it difficult to recognise the body to which it belongs. The concealment disrupts the gaze of the spectator and creates anxiety, not by any explicit threat but by perceptual incompleteness. Fear is something that is not quite visible, not quite recognizable. In Indonesia long hair has a profound symbolism, representing female spirits, mourning and liminal identity. It evokes communal memories of mythic figures and supernatural stories, linking the object to a culturally shared pool of fear. Here, long hair functions as a cultural symbol, activating historical and mythological memory, as well as a cinematic image.

The burial shroud is a sign with multiple levels of signification, related on three levels of meaning. It looks very much like the linen in which corpses are wrapped, directly alluding to the practices of burial and death. The shroud, then, marks the coming of death, the

persistence of the past, or the recurrence of unresolved trauma, especially when it occurs outside of its customary ritual context. This dislocation transforms the shroud into a symbol of ritual interruption that suggests that the dead were not properly laid to rest.

In the local cultural and religious contexts, the funeral shroud is a symbol of purity, responsibility and spiritual passage. The recurrence of this conflict between sacred ritual and its violation underlines the point that terror is derived not only from death but also from ceremonies conducted in an improper, insufficient or neglected manner. The burial shroud, through these varied connotations, acts as a visual bridge between religious systems and narrative conflict and is a symbol of the film's indictment of a fractured spiritual order.

Ritual objects like incense, candles, offerings, and ceremonial equipment lend to the semiotic complexity of the film.

These props create liminal spaces that connect the living and dead, and are representative of transitional spaces in which normal logic is suspended. At the indexical level ritual objects are attempts at spiritual communication, protection or appeasement. Their failure, interruption or misplacement heightens the narrative suspense and underscores the fragility of human control over supernatural forces. Ritual props are embedded in Indonesian cosmology, signifying sanctity, ancestor worship, and communal belief systems. The film anchors terror in ritual practice and avoids abstract or universalized fear,

instead producing culturally situated horror based on familiarity and belief. The association of ritual materials with characters emphasizes human fragility, depicting fear as a result of spiritual disequilibrium rather than a separate being.

In sum, our study's findings show that terror props in *Rambut Kafan* operate as active semiotic structures that create affective relations, atmosphere and meaning between the viewer and the images. Thematic coherence and visual continuity are created by the recurrence, spatial location and modification of objects between scenes, permitting the slow build-up of terror through symbolic resonance, anticipation and identification. This approach is consistent with semiotics, which states that meaning is created by relational systems and not by individual images.

These results suggest that the film's disturbing impact is due to the symbolic and culturally rooted use of visual cues. *Rambut Kafan* does not depend on traditional horror strategies of fast shock effects or the sheer monstrosity of its subjects. The film employs visual repetition, spatial ambiguity and the use of props as a means to build dramatic tension and induce dread. This is in line with the observation of Widhana (2021) that horror props in Indonesian films are often inert. props are dynamic things that play an active role in visual dramaturgy and narrative development in *Rambut Kafan*. They are not only the symbol of horror but also that which produces horror through persistent semiotic engagement.

The creative implications of these findings are profound in the context of the

theatre. For example, stage actors may use long hair as a visual signifier of mental states such as trauma, embodied memory, or fractured identity. Hair does not need to be represented realistically in theatre; it can be reinterpreted through the use of abstract materials, choreographed movement or space extension. The meaning of hair can change dynamically in the performance through its ability to spill into the performance area, bind performers or respond to lighting and cadence.

At the same time burial shrouds could be repurposed as versatile stage props, oscillating between symbolic object, scenery and costume. On stage, the shroud can act as a spatial divider, a boundary between domains, a malleable surface that absorbs movement and shadow. Alternatively, ritual objects can be included in the dramaturgy of the theatre as performative actions, rather than static signs, allowing the audience to participate in the creation of liminal space and the evolution of rituals in real time.

These modifications turn horror objects into cross-media semiotic systems capable of generating new interpretations in theatrical contexts. The artifacts are conceptual and symbolic tools that generate performances that are immersive, contemplative and culturally relevant, rather than literal analogues to filmic imagery. The study shows that semiotic analysis is not merely an interpretive approach but also a creative framework for present-day theatrical performance in

Indonesia. It offers a crucial path towards the reinvention of horror aesthetics in artistic media.



Figure

2. Burial shroud as a symbolic property of death
(Source: Screenshot from *Rambut Kafan*, 2025)

The The burial shroud is especially powerful in its transformative potential when translated from film to theatre precisely because its meaning is so bound up in materiality, ritual function, and bodily presence. In the cinematic medium the shroud is mainly emphasised by close-up shots, controlled framing and increased attention to visual texture. The camera isolates the fabric, its folds, fibers and stillness, enabling it to function as a concentrated visual sign strongly linked to death, immobility, and ritual purity. Film also directs the viewer's perception through editing, shot length, and composition, so that the shroud is legible as a contained and stabilized sign within the visual frame. Therefore, the horror effect is created by the proximity and association in the visual field, not by any physical or spatial contact.

This cinematic containment sharply contrasts with the theatrical medium where the burial shroud can be released from the fixed boundaries of the frame and re-activated as a spatially expansive and temporally mutable

element. The shroud in theatre need not remain a static object of death, but can at the same time operate as a bodily extension, a scenographic structure and a performative partner. The shroud can be suspended over the stage to divide or condense space, draped over performers to conceal, constrain, or fragment their bodies, or continuously manipulated through choreographed movement to produce shifting forms, shadows, and visual distortions. Such practices cause the shroud to oscillate between costume, environment and symbol, destabilizing singular or fixed meanings and inviting audiences to actively negotiate interpretation.

Theatricalizing this transformation highlights the materiality of the burial shroud and its immediate relation to the bodies of the performers. The weight, texture, resistance, and pliability of the fabric are central to the generation of meaning, foregrounding corporeal vulnerability and the body's entanglement with ritual, memory, and death. In this way, as performers interact with, emerge from or are enveloped by the shroud, the object ceases to be an abstract representation of death and becomes instead an agent that enacts confinement, suffocation, concealment or transition in a physical way. Unlike film, theater puts the shroud in shared space and real time, mediating its presence not through the visual control of the camera but through the heightened sensory and emotional proximity of object, performer, and audience.

Moreover, the live manipulation of the burial shroud allows performers to continuously create liminal and unstable spaces on stage. The shroud can shift its function within a single performance through light, shadow, movement, and sound. It may appear as a funerary object, a boundary between worlds, a threshold of spiritual passage, or a visual expression of unresolved trauma. This fluidity gives the shroud a liminal quality that reflects transitions between life and death, presence and absence, as well as memory and forgetting. Theatre supports this kind of instability by allowing multiple meanings to coexist without requiring narrative closure.

The theatrical use of the burial shroud also reshapes the position of the audience. Theatre audiences share the same spatial and temporal setting with performers and stage objects, unlike cinema audiences who experience mediated and fixed visual frames. The movement of the shroud, its interaction with bodies and objects, and the sounds produced during performance can create immediate sensory engagement. In this context, horror is not only observed visually but also experienced through shared presence and unfolding action.

This condition highlights theatre as a medium that enables embodied, relational, and immersive experiences. The burial shroud functions as a dramaturgical element that changes through performer interaction, movement unpredictability, and shared temporality between stage and audience. It contributes to the construction of rhythm, tension, and affective progression on stage. In this way, the shroud operates as a convergence

of cultural symbolism, physical performance, and audience interpretation.

These practices transform the theatrical adaptation of horror props from an imitation of cinematic imagery to a creative and critical reinterpretation. Cultural symbols embedded in film are not reproduced but reactivated through liveness, materiality and performative interaction. So the burial shroud shows how horror props can work as cross-media semiotic systems, capable of generating new meanings and affective intensities when recontextualized in the specific conditions of theatrical performance.



Figure 3. Ritual props (offerings) in a liminal space

(Source: Screenshot from *Rambut Kanan*, 2025)

Multisensory atmospheres of the theatrical performance are manifested through the decisive role of ritual props that become key instruments of immersive and embodied meaning-making. In film, the mediation of visual and auditory perception is mainly through images, montage and sound design. The shared physical environment of the theater allows the ritual objects to be perceived simultaneously by several sensory channels. The smell of burning incense can fill the performance space and stay in the

air, unsteady candlelight can create flickering shadows that constantly change spatial perception, and rhythmic actor movement can align bodily presence with ritual action. These sensory features combine to make sacred liminal spaces that the audience physically occupies and not just sees. Horror here is not merely a representational effect, but an embodied feeling that is anchored in proximity, co-presence and temporal simultaneity.

Such multisensory participation foregrounds the cultural and spiritual dimensions of horror, situating fear within the context of lived, collective experience. Fear in theatrical ritual becomes somatic and relational, involving breathing, posture and spatial awareness, rather than an abstract emotional response provoked by visual shock. The audience does not only interpret signs, it participates in an atmosphere that unfolds around and with them. This aspect of the immersive is especially important in the case of culturally-based horror, where ritual objects are imbued with cosmological meanings that are tied to belief systems, ancestral memory and spiritual obligation. Theatre's ability to engage smell, movement, light and sound holistically, allows these meanings to be activated and for horror to become a shared ritual encounter, rather than a distant spectacle.

The main implication of these results is that the adaptation from cinema to theater should not be conceived as a visual imitation or a literal translation process. Such endeavours to imitate cinematic images on stage threaten to turn the practice of theatre into a secondary or derivative medium. Rather, successful adaptation entails a fundamental redefinition of signs that is congruent with the material, spatial and temporal conditions of live

performance. Horror film props thus do not function as visual templates to be copied, but as conceptual and semiotic resources to be rearticulated through theatrical strategies such as embodied action, spatial composition, and sensory activation. This shift in approach results in theatre practitioners concentrating on symbolic resonance, performative interaction and audience engagement rather than superficial visual likeness.

Thus, theater generates a kind of horror that is reflexive rather than spectacular, culturally contextual rather than generic, and experientially immersive rather than purely visual. Horror exists in the gap between presence and absence, between ritual order and disruption, between familiarity and uncertainty, tensions heightened by the immediacy of live performance. Theatrical horror is not in competition with cinema for visual realism, but instead lays claim to its own aesthetic logic of liveness, embodiment, and multisensory perception.

Theoretically these results justify the extension of theater semiotics on the base of the redefinition of the notion of the stage object. Stage props are reinterpreted as transposable semiotic systems, able to carry multi-layered meanings across artistic media and cultural contexts, rather than being fixed signs that function within a closed system of performance. This re-conceptualization challenges the common semiotic models that regard theatre objects as stable, self-contained and medium-specific. Instead it stresses the mobility of signs, the historical sedimentation of

meaning and the part played by cultural memory in the construction of interpretation. Objects arrive on stage already freighted with associations from film, ritual practice, collective experience, which are then re-negotiated within the context of the live performance.

Furthermore, this view points to the potential for stage objects to be continually recontextualised. Meaning is not produced by the physical shape of the object or its symbolic referent alone, but through the interaction of the object with the bodies of performers, with spatial arrangements, with sensory stimuli and with the perception of the audience. Stage props in this sense are dynamic sign carriers that mediate between cinematic imagery, theatrical embodiment, and spectatorship. They become grounds of negotiation between the visual memory of film and the immediacy of live performance, creating new possibilities of interpretation that transcend the limits of any one medium.

Consequently, the stage object no longer functions solely as a representational object, but rather as an agent of dramaturgy. Props are active participants in the rhythm of the narrative, the intensity of the emotions and the symbolic structure of the performance. They function as co-constructors of meaning, not as passive supports for human action, affecting pace, directing attention and modulating affect. This study contributes to the theoretical debate in the area of theatre semiotics by foregrounding props as cross-media semiotic agents and provides a conceptual framework for practitioners wishing to create innovative theatrical works that are rooted in culture. In this sense, props from horror films become a site for creative experimentation, allowing

theatre to engage critically with the influence of cinema and to claim its material, sensory and performative specificity.

CONCLUSION

The present study suggests that the horror props in Rambut Kafan are structured and culturally situated visual sign systems rather than incidental cinematic elements. Long hair, burial shrouds and ritual objects appear to be important semiotic devices structuring the horror atmosphere and organizing narrative tension. These props can be read as layered with meanings of death, trauma, spiritual disturbance and liminal conditions between life and death using Peirce's icon-index-symbol framework. Their repetition and variation in context suggest that horror in the film is tied up with processes of visual signification embedded in cultural references, rather than being primarily grounded in narrative shock or visual excess.

The research demonstrates the relevance of film semiotic analysis to theatrical practice, by examining horror props as cross-media semiotic resources. Instead of seeing them as fixed or medium-bound signs, props can be understood as elements that can be recontextualized within the live performance environment. This perspective may serve as a springboard for theatre practitioners to explore materiality, spatial design, movement and multisensory elements in the shaping of horror aesthetics on stage. Future research may explore comparative studies of Indonesian horror films and

other kinds of performance, such as site-specific and immersive performance, to better understand visual and ritual signs in different artistic and cultural contexts.

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