Unraveling *Keramat* (2009) Through Narrative, Supernatural Elements, and Social Issue

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Abstract

This study analyzes Keramat (2009), an Indonesian horror film directed by Monty Tiwa, through its narrative, supernatural elements, and social themes. While horror films are increasingly popular in Indonesia, Keramat stands out for integrating Javanese mysticism with modern storytelling in a found footage format. It tells the story of a Jakarta-based film crew set to shoot a movie in Yogyakarta that encounters supernatural forces, blending local beliefs and eerie sounds to create an immersive horror experience. This qualitative research examines how Keramat (2009) reflects the tension between modernity and traditional spirituality in Indonesian society. By exploring setting, plot, and characterization, this research highlights the film's role in portraying the persistence of Javanese mystical beliefs in contemporary Indonesia and its impact on Indonesian horror cinema. Through themes of supernatural possession and the clash of urban lifestyles with sacred rural traditions, the film underscores the cultural importance of respecting local customs and provides a compelling narrative that engages audiences while deepening their understanding of cultural identity.

Keywords: culture, horror film, narrative, supernatural

INTRODUCTION

Recently, the Indonesian film industry has been dominated by the horror genre, largely due to the consistent enthusiasm of Indonesian audiences. From January to August 2024, 8 out of the 11 highest-grossing films in Indonesia were horror films, a testament to their success in effectively portraying the creepiness and fear that define the genre (Auliany, 2024). These achievements have positively impacted innovation by incorporating local stories, lore, and myths into the genre (Ediantes et al., 2024). In addition, the creative and relatable approach used in horror films, which often feature local supernatural elements, plays a significant role in attracting audiences (Noer, 2021). The quality expectations of the film director drives viewers' interest in these films (Widagdo, 2021). The role of social media influencers has also been instrumental in the growth of the genre. Influencers creatively recommend horror films to their large audiences, sharing the thrill and excitement of the genre, which further drives the popularity of Indonesian horror films (Ediantes et al., 2024).

The success of Indonesian horror films lies in their use of local folklore combined with innovative storytelling, as seen in *Keramat* (2009) by Monty Tiwa. This film, presented in a found-footage style, follows a group of filmmakers in Yogyakarta who accidentally disturb supernatural forces, blending traditional Javanese mysticism with modern cinematic techniques. *Keramat* became a cult favorite, showcasing how the genre's mix of cultural elements and immersive horror continues to captivate Indonesian audiences. Its unique approach to horror earned widespread recognition for pushing the boundaries of the genre in Indonesia.

Keramat is about a series of mystical events experienced by the film crew while in Yogyakarta. where they always record their activities behind the camera which is then called "behind the scenes". Further, strange and mystical events began to occur when they arrived at the house they would live in a remote village in Yogyakarta. starting from a man who suddenly ordered them to go home, then heard the sound of crying, the sound of gamelan, and the appearance of women wearing traditional Javanese clothes.

At first they don't want to bother because they are more concerned with work but the situation gets stranger and less conducive when Migi Parahita who suddenly gets sick then disappears. and their search to find Migi makes them trapped in another world. They finally met the queen of the spirit world. She told them to leave the place before sunrise. If they failed, they would be trapped in the spirit world forever. This made the whole team frantic to escape.

Keramat presents unique elements essential for understanding cultural beliefs, particularly through its focus on Javanese mysticism. The film delves into Indonesian culture, emphasizing beliefs in the supernatural and spirits while showcasing the rich traditions and fears prevalent within society. As the characters navigate their journey, they encounter various local myths, enhanced by the eerie sounds of Javanese singing and traditional instruments like the gamelan, which deepen the film's immersive experience. *Keramat* not only captivates viewers with its thrilling narrative but also serves as a significant study of Javanese mysticism, reflecting how these cultural elements shape and influence the cinematic landscape of Indonesia. Its exploration of supernatural beliefs, along with strong performances, positions the film as a pivotal work that resonates with both audiences and scholars alike.

Incorporating ghosts from Indonesian folklore, such as the Pocong, the Red Kebaya Ghost, the Banaspati fireball, and a mysterious traditional dancer, the film taps into the collective fears and beliefs that resonate with audiences. This connection to cultural heritage makes the

narrative both relatable and compelling. *Keramat* draws on Javanese mystical beliefs, featuring spirits such as the Pocong, Banaspati, and the Queen of the Spirit Realm. The film highlights how deeply these cultural fears still exist, even as the modern world continues to evolve. It depicts the ongoing tension between the supernatural and modern life, reflecting how mysticism continues to shape the fears of Indonesian society. By combining these cultural elements with a unique style of horror, *Keramat* marks a milestone in Indonesian horror, encouraging filmmakers to explore local traditions and beliefs in innovative new ways. These explorations not only provide entertainment but also foster a deeper understanding of cultural identity in a rapidly changing world.

According to Storey (2014), popular culture can be understood primarily through two key definitions. The first is a quantitative definition, where popular culture is characterized by its widespread appeal and consumption by a large number of people. This definition focuses on popularity as something measurable through metrics such as sales of DVDs, CDs, and books, or attendance at events. The premise here is that popular culture is determined by the extent to which it is liked, consumed, and participated in by the public. However, there is ongoing debate about the threshold that defines something as "popular," making this definition somewhat contentious.

The second definition identifies popular culture as a form of folk culture, originating from and created by "the people" without the influence of elites. This view sees popular culture as an organic expression of the masses, distinct from commercial or institutionalized culture. However, this concept faces limitations in contemporary settings, where it becomes increasingly difficult to separate what is considered genuine folk culture from the effects of modern commercial influences. Storey (2014) underscores the challenges in providing a clear and consistent description of popular culture under both definitions, noting the blurred lines between authentic folk culture and the commercialization that often shapes cultural expressions today.

Furthermore, Heryanto (2014) explained that popular culture, as a product of an industrialized society, relies on technologies for mass production, distribution, and duplication. It encompasses commercially mass-produced sounds, images, and messages, such as music, films, fashion, and television, targeting the largest possible number of consumers, primarily for entertainment. This process is profit-driven, supplying commodities to people as consumers. With the expansion of popular culture's reach, it has become a platform for ideological battles, as groups aim to secure a dominant position within the nation's power structure.

Films in the horror genre often leave viewers feeling scared, terrified, and unable to sleep peacefully afterward. These reactions occur because the primary goals of horror films are to scare, shock, horrify, and disgust the audience by using a range of visual and sound techniques, often involving supernatural elements, abnormal situations, mutilation, blood, gore, pain, death, deformity, decay, darkness, invasion, mutation, extreme chaos, and the fear of the unknown (Cherry, 2009; Newman, 2011 as cited in Martin, 2019)

Furthermore, Cherry (2009) stated that horror films can be categorized into gothic, supernatural, psychological, monster, slashers, body horror, and exploitation. Gothic is based on classic horror stories that often adapt well-known monsters or terrifying creatures from novels and mythology. Supernatural features spirits, ghosts, witchcraft, the devil, and other supernatural entities interfering in the real world, often including strange or unsettling elements. Psychological examines psychological conditions and mental illnesses, including crime and the actions of serial killers. Monster shows how everyday life is disrupted by natural and supernatural creatures, resulting in death and destruction. Slashers depict groups of

teenagers being hunted by a stalker in familiar domestic and suburban settings, where the sole survivor is usually a girl who, in earlier films, has not engaged in underage sexual activity. Body horror examines feelings of revulsion and disgust related to the human body, often featuring themes of mutation, disease, or unusual and fetishistic behaviors, such as cannibalism or sadomasochism. Exploitation centers on extreme or taboo topics, including violence and torture, as well as controversial subjects like Nazi death camps and the rape and sexual assault of women. These categories demonstrate that there are various forms within the horror genre.

A study by Pratiwi and Febriana (2021) was published in the Indonesian Journal of Cultural and Community Development (IJCCD) under the title *Mistik Kejawen dalam Film* Satu Suro. The research concludes that horror film displayed local mysticism. Using Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic model, the film demonstrates a hyperrealistic portrayal of Javanese mysticism that departs from conventional reality. This hyperrealism is mainly defined by beliefs in spirits and supernatural elements, along with rituals like spiritual offerings. Many Javanese people continue to practice these traditions, believing in myths and connecting natural events to the supernatural. Rituals such as slametan honor ancestors and aim to prevent misfortune, reflecting the deep-rooted influence of Kejawen culture.

An article titled *Mitos dan Kepercayaan Masyarakat Gunungkidul dalam Film Pendek* Lamun Sumelang *Karya Ludy Oji* was conducted by Widiantantri et al. (2023) and published in the Repetisi: Riset Pendidikan Bahasa dan Sastra Indonesia. Based on the research conducted, this study displayed that horror film employs myths and beliefs. These myths and beliefs in the short film *Lamun Sumelang* by Ludy Oji are common in the Gunungkidul community and are passed down orally through storytelling. Some of the key myths include the "pulung gantung" (a belief linked to suicides), the idea that aging becomes a burden for children, and rituals to ward off misfortune, such as scattering rice in front of houses. The community also believes in the power of shamans and the idea that the souls of those who commit suicide will wander. The myths and beliefs shown in the film *Lamun Sumelang* closely reflect the real beliefs still held by the Gunungkidul community today. However, cases of "pulung gantung" are less frequent now, as the community has become more aware and actively works to prevent suicides linked to this belief.

Safitri et al. (2024) conducted an article with the title *Analysis of Javanese Mysticism in the Film* Qorin *Directed by Ginanti Rona* in the Asa Journal of Education and Learning Research. In this article, the researchers concluded that horror film explores mystical and spiritual values. Their study discovers that *Qorin* explores Javanese culture, particularly the *kejawen* philosophy, which emphasizes balance and harmony between humans, nature, and the spiritual world. Through the characters' interactions with supernatural beings and rituals, the film highlights important Javanese traditions, such as ceremonies to honor ancestors. It also reflects the concepts of karma and destiny, showing how characters face the consequences of their actions. Themes of self-discovery and finding inner peace, central to Javanese teachings, are explored throughout the characters' journeys. *Qorin* can be viewed as a useful medium for presenting and illustrating Javanese mystical beliefs, giving audiences a glimpse into the spiritual and cultural diversity of the Javanese people. The difference from the current study lies in the data sources used.

An article conducted by Rosul (2024) titled *Representasi Budaya Jawa pada Film* Sewu Dino in Prosiding Pijar: Pedagogi Bahasa dan Sastra Indonesia. Based on this article, it is stated that horror film demonstrates mystical beliefs and traditions. This article found that the film highlights the importance of supernatural beliefs in Javanese life through the ritual of *Sewu Dino*, showing values like perseverance, sacrifice, and courage. It also reflects how power and

control in Javanese society are often linked to mystical practices, with those possessing supernatural abilities using them to maintain authority. The main character, Sri, represents resilience in the face of social injustice, while also showing that inner strength can help overcome oppression. The film emphasizes the importance of community, loyalty, and respect for tradition, as characters support each other through challenges. Additionally, *Sewu Dino* portrays women as strong and resilient figures, with Sri proving that women can be leaders and protectors in society despite facing discrimination. *Sewu Dino* was successful in capturing the traditions, mystical beliefs, cultural values, and social structure of the Javanese people in excellent detail. The difference between the research conducted by Rosul (2024) and the current research lies in the data sources used.

Nai et al. (2024) in the article *Analisis Persepsi Penonton Tentang Fenomena Mistis Dalam Film* Badarawuhi di Desa Penari, published in the Jurnal Ilmu Komunikasi Dan Media Sosial (JKOMDIS). Their research reveals how the horror film reflects local cultural beliefs and mystical phenomena that shape viewers' perceptions. The significance of horror film *Badarawuhi di Desa Penari* is evident through several key aspects: the depiction of local beliefs and myths, the influence of mystical elements on the audience's beliefs about the supernatural, the impact of cultural representation on audience perception, the differences in beliefs between Javanese and non-Javanese audiences, and the respect for local beliefs despite modern skepticism. This research highlights how horror films function as a cultural window, offering deeper insights into the beliefs of various societies.

Sutandio (2015) wrote an article entitled *Kembalinya yang Tertindas: Pemuda dan Trauma Sejarah dalam Film* Jelangkung *Karya Rizal Mantovani dan Jose Purnomo*, published in Plaridel. Their study reveals how horror films often serve as a medium to reflect social and historical trauma. Jelangkung shows how horror is used to depict the return of repressed fears, particularly those related to national tragedies such as the May 1998 incident. This movie highlights several elements often found in horror movies, supernatural creatures as embodiments of past trauma, youth rebellion against authority, removal of the patriarchal figure as protecto, the use of myths and legends as symbols of collective fear, and a narrative that does not offer solutions, unlike conventional horror films. Through these elements, Jelangkung emphasizes the important role of horror films in exploring and visualizing social traumas that are difficult to express directly.

Kurniawan and Santabudi (2023) examine the horror film *Mangkujiwo* (2020) in their article titled *Signifikansi Unsur Budaya Lokal dalam Film Horror* Mangkujiwo *(2020),* published in the Sense Journal of Film and Television Studies. Horror films often explore themes closely tied to cultural beliefs, myths, and societal values, making them a powerful way to show local traditions and ideas. This is particularly true in Indonesian horror, where films frequently explore aspects of Javanese mysticism and social practices related to beliefs in religion and power within Javanese communities. Their study highlights how these elements are clearly shown in *Mangkujiwo.* The significance of Javanese mysticism and cultural elements in shaping the film's narrative, emphasizing five main patterns: 1) belief in myths, magic, and the kejawen mystical system; 2) the role of shamans (dukun) in mystical practices; 3) wealth and thrones as symbols of power; 4) revenge as a form of justice; and 5) the family as the site of tragedy. It concluded that *Mangkujiwo* shows how Javanese culture and mysticism play a big role in its story, making it a clear example of local traditions in Indonesian horror films.

Setting is one of the crucial elements in any narrative, as it shapes the background where and when the story unfolds. Wellek and Warren (1956, as cited in Sari, 2014) concerned setting with the places where the story takes place. On the other hand, setting refers not only to the

geographical location and time period of the story but also to the daily lifestyle of the characters and the climate within the narrative. According to Kenney (1966), setting refers to the point in time and place at which events or the plot occur, involving the characters in specific contexts. This highlights the role of setting in influencing both character behavior and plot direction. In other words, setting refers to the specific time and place where the story's events occur, which shape both the characters and their experiences.

Plot is a series of events in the story. According to Lukens (2003, as cited in Sari, 2014), plots are the sequence of events showing a character in action. The plot follows a sequence from the beginning, through the middle, to the end. It consists of five essential elements that structure a narrative. Freytag (1863, as cited in Griffith, 2011), outlined a five-part structure for analyzing a narrative's plot. This structure includes the exposition, where characters and settings are introduced; the rising action, which builds suspense as conflicts develop; the climax, the turning point of the story; the falling action, which addresses the aftermath of the climax; and the resolution, where conflicts are resolved and the narrative concludes. This framework is useful for understanding the story's emotions and structure of the story.

Characterization is the process in a fictional work which the author used to tell the viewers about the characters' details. The details may include behaviors, traits, age, etc. As explained by DiYanni (2001), characterization is the methods used by authors to depict and make character clear. The viewer is able to comprehend each character and, by extension, the entire plot because of the characterization. To understand the character's characterization, the viewer can analyze through the appearance, dialogue, external action, internal action, reactions of other characters, contrast: dramatic foils, caricature, and leitmotif, and choice of name (Boggs & Petrie, 2000). Through these analyses, the characterization of a character can fully be understood by the viewer. Following that, characterization emerges as an essential element of literary works.

Point of view refers to the narrator's connection to the story's world (Griffith, 2011). According to Genette (1980), the concept of point of view encompasses two key ideas. The first is focalization, which refers to the character's perspective in a narrative. The researcher identifies three types of focalization: zero focalization, where the narrator possesses omniscient knowledge; internal focalization, where the narrative is presented through the viewpoint of a single character; and external focalization, where only observable actions are described. Additionally, the researcher distinguishes between heterodiegetic narrators, who exist outside the story, and homodiegetic narrators, who are characters within the narrative. Similarly, Abrams (1981) defines point of view as "the vantage point from which the narrative is conveyed from the author to the viewer," emphasizing its significance in shaping the viewer's understanding of a story. The use of different narrative perspectives can influence viewers' emotional responses and engagement with the narrative, underscoring the importance of point of view in storytelling.

METHODS

Qualitative method is used to conduct and analyze this research. According to Creswell and Poth (2017), qualitative method is a process of investigation aimed at understanding social or human issues. In this study, narrative elements, supernatural elements, and social issues are the focus of research, and the appropriate approach is qualitative. There are four key components in qualitative method, including research relationships, selection, data collection, and data analysis (Maxwell, 2013). These components are essential for gathering and

interpreting data, and they influence the overall reliability and accuracy of the conclusions drawn.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In *Keramat* (2009), Migi is very sensitive to supernatural forces, becoming vulnerable and behaving oddly as the disturbances increase. Sadha begins as a skeptic, not believing in the mystical events, but eventually comes to accept them. Poppy, playing herself, is outspoken and cares deeply for her friends, especially Migi, approaching the situation with a realistic and strong attitude. Brama stays calm and collected, carefully thinking through the strange occurrences. Miea is the strict, no-nonsense director who leads the crew through the supernatural dangers. Cungkring, the laid-back cameraman, records all the eerie events, contributing to the film's found footage style. Dimas, another director, tries to stay rational but eventually succumbs to fear. Dyaz, one of the actors, begins the journey relaxed but grows increasingly anxious and emotional as the danger intensifies. Nyi Pramodha Wardhani, a powerful supernatural presence tied to the spiritual traditions of Java, influences the events without appearing physically, creating a tense atmosphere. The dukun, with his deep knowledge of the mystical world, acts as a mediator between the human and spirit worlds, trying to calm the spirits, including Nyi Pramodha Wardhani, who holds significant influence over the land and the filming location.

Keramat (2009) follows a film crew that travels to Yogyakarta to make a movie. After visiting the mystical Parangtritis Beach, they begin to experience bizarre occurrences. One crew member, Migi, becomes possessed by a spirit and starts acting oddly. As the supernatural events escalate, the crew decides to flee into the forest. Unfortunately, they end up trapped there and encounter terrifying situations. One by one, the crew members vanish without a trace, leaving the others in a state of fear. They struggle to survive and seek an escape from the forest filled with supernatural forces. The film concludes with the crew's fate remaining uncertain, highlighting the strong influence of mystical beliefs in Javanese culture and creating an eerie atmosphere.

Furthermore, the film *Keramat* (2009) is set in several locations in Indonesia starting from Jakarta and ending in Bantul, Yogyakarta. A film crew from Jakarta comes to Bantul to prepare for filming and brings the big city lifestyle to an area that is considered sacred. They spend the night in Bantul and visit places like Parangtritis Beach which is known as the gateway to another world. They also enter a creepy forest and discover an old temple. At the end of the story, they find themselves on the slopes of a huge mountain called Merapi. The setting of the story shows the difference between modern life in the big city and the traditional beliefs of the region, and the conflict intensifies when they enter a sacred place that is revered by the locals.

The way this film is presented is very interesting. *Keramat* (2009) uses a third-person point of view, the audience sees the action through the camera held by the film's characters. Everything happens through his camera, and different people hold the camera at different points of view. Allowing us to see the story from different angles. It feels like we are watching a real video of the horrible things that happened to these people. At the end of the movie, a newspaper report about the incident appears, adding to the sense of reality. The story presented in this way makes the scary parts feel closer to the audience and more real, despite using a third-person point of view.

Moreover, in *Keramat* (2009), the protagonists are a group of individuals from a film production team, including Migi, Poppy, Sadha, Miea, Dimas, Diaz, Brama, and Cungkring.

These characters are central to the story, and their collective experiences drive the narrative forward. Each of them plays a role in the unfolding supernatural events, with Migi becoming the key figure as the plot progresses. Migi's possession by a supernatural entity adds complexity to the story, making her both a protagonist and a victim in need of rescue. On the other hand, the antagonist in the film is Nyi Pramodha Wardhani, a vengeful spirit with malevolent intentions. She is the source of the terror and danger that the characters face, creating a significant supernatural threat that disrupts the normal flow of reality. As a ghost, Nyi Pramodha Wardhani is an eerie and powerful force that embodies the supernatural horror genre, influencing the story through her otherworldly abilities.

The film is categorized as a supernatural horror because it centers on elements that go beyond natural or scientific explanation, specifically the presence of a ghost and the involvement of mystical forces. The antagonist's identity as a spirit and the supernatural occurrences, such as possession and travel to an unseen world, highlight the paranormal aspects that define the genre. The protagonists, except for Migi, are sent into the unseen world by a shaman in a desperate attempt to save Migi from the grip of Nyi Pramodha Wardhani. This journey into the unknown reflects the core traits of supernatural horror, where characters must confront forces that are beyond their understanding and control. Supernatural elements like possession and abduction into another world play a key role in building the tension and fear typical of this genre. In *Keramat*, the danger the characters face is not from a human antagonist, but from an unearthly entity, making the film a clear example of supernatural horror.

In addition, the characters in the *Keramat* (2009) are vanquished by the evil forces or evil spirits. Nobody makes it out alive, and those who do are trapped in the spirit world. In this instance, we may refer to the conclusion as tragic since the characters did not win. Miea, Sadha, Poppy, Diaz, Brama, and Dimas call a shaman for assistance as they attempt to save Migi, who has been abducted by a spirit. However, the shaman is unable to assist them and passes away inexplicably. They lost their way after the shaman left, and the ghost eventually took them as well. Due to instructions from the spirits to leave before sunrise and die, they almost survived but failed to find a way out and got stuck.

The characters, Miea, Sadha, Poppy, Diaz, Brama, Dimas, and Migi, are ordinary people without special powers until the film ends. Strange things begin to happen when they meet a random guy who tells them to leave the village, but they refuse to listen, and an angry spirit starts possessing Migi, causing her to become distraught. They turn to a shaman for assistance because of their capacity to see invisible spirits, communicate with them, and see the other side. It was this power that led to their kidnapping by a malevolent spirit and kept them trapped in their world.

Additionally, *Keramat* (2009) closely related to local myths and the social context of Indonesia, particularly Javanese culture. The film combines Javanese mysticism with supernatural folklore that are deeply rooted in local belief, evident through the spiritual practices, rituals, and encounters with supernatural entities experienced by the characters. According to Geertz (1976 as cited in Rich II, 2012), Javanese mythology is based on a complex belief system involving various types of spirits that influence daily life and spiritual practices, including stories of spirits, hauntings, and sacred places, which are treated with great respect. In *Keramat*, the crew crosses spiritual boundaries and ignores local customs, leading to eerie and terrifying experiences. Socially, the film highlights the clash between modern urban life and traditional background, and represents the younger generation which is less connected to the deep spiritual practices in rural or sacred. This tension between modernity and tradition is a

recurring theme in Indonesian horror films, and *Keramat* uses it to build its suspense and horror, emphasizing the importance of respecting local traditions, especially in sacred places.

The portrayal of women reflects common gender dynamics in horror films, where women are often depicted as more sensitive to supernatural forces. This is seen when Migi, a female crew member, becomes possessed by a spirit. While the film does not explicitly focus on gender issues, this moment mirrors a typical pattern in horror movies, especially in Indonesian cinema, where women are portrayed as more vulnerable to spiritual or mystical experiences. This portrayal aligns with cultural beliefs, particularly in Javanese tradition, where women are often seen as more emotionally connected or susceptible to the supernatural. Although the film uses this portrayal to build tension, it does not deeply explore or challenge these gender roles.

CONCLUSION

As in the results above, the researchers concluded that the *Keramat* (2009) effectively integrates Javanese mysticism with the supernatural horror genre, creating a unique narrative that resonates with Indonesia's rich cultural beliefs. The researchers observed that the film illustrates the conflict between modernity and traditional spirituality—a recurring theme in Indonesian horror—by depicting how the crew's disregard for spiritual boundaries leads to the unleashing of supernatural forces. This tension underscores the importance of honoring local customs and reflects the potential consequences of ignoring cultural beliefs.

Additionally, the researchers noted that the film's setting heightens this conflict by contrasting the fast-paced urban lifestyles of the crew with the sacred and mystical atmosphere of rural Java. The researchers found that the found-footage style enhances the film's realism, drawing the audienceS into the frightening events as if they were witnessing a real-life account of supernatural occurrences. By presenting the story through various perspectives via handheld cameras, the film intensifies the tension, making the unfolding horror feel personal and immediate. This combination of elements contributes to a compelling narrative that engages audiences while offering insights into the complexities of cultural traditions in Indonesia.

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