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**Cultural Supernaturalism in Indonesian Horror Films: An Analysis of “Nini Thowok” and  
Its Reflection of Javanese Folklore**

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**Abstract**

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*This study explores the role of cultural supernaturalism in Indonesian horror films, focusing on the 2018 film Nini Thowok, which is based on Javanese folklore. The study aims to examine how traditional spiritual beliefs and modern narratives intersect in Indonesian horror, particularly through the symbolism of the nini thowok doll. Using a qualitative approach, the study analyzes the film’s narrative, setting, and characters to uncover the broader cultural themes it represents. The research findings suggest that Nini Thowok not only uses supernatural elements for horror but also reflects the social tensions between tradition and modernization in Indonesia. The film’s depiction of ancestral debt and spiritual responsibility highlights the enduring influence of folklore in modern cinema, offering insight into how these themes resonate with Indonesian audiences. The study concludes that the integration of folklore in Nini Thowok contributes to the global appeal of Indonesian horror films while preserving cultural identity.*

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**Keywords:** Cultural Supernaturalism, Javanese Folklore, Indonesian Horror Films, Nini Thowok.

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## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, Indonesian horror films have experienced a surge in popularity, attracting millions of viewers both locally and globally. This genre's success can be attributed to its unique blend of Indonesia's rich cultural heritage and supernatural elements, setting it apart from other horror traditions. Unlike Western horror, which often emphasizes psychological fear or graphic violence, Indonesian horror typically explores spiritual themes, reflecting the country's deep-rooted traditions and beliefs. This distinctive approach makes Indonesian horror films not just terrifying but also culturally significant, as they tap into the nation's longstanding spiritual connections.

This topic is worth exploring because the success of Indonesian horror films extends beyond their entertainment value; they represent a cultural phenomenon that bridges modern life with ancient traditions. Indonesia's vibrant spiritual culture, combined with modern cinematic techniques, creates a compelling narrative tension between the mystical and the contemporary. Many Indonesians continue to hold deep beliefs in the supernatural, and this coexistence of modernity and mysticism provides fertile ground for horror films that reflect both cultural continuity and change.

*Nini Thowok* (2018), directed by Erwin Arnada, serves as an ideal case study of this phenomenon. The film weaves traditional Javanese beliefs with modern horror storytelling, focusing on Nadine, a young woman who inherits a guesthouse in Central Java. As she unravels the guesthouse's dark past, she encounters the eerie presence of a *nini thowok* doll—a ritual object from Javanese culture believed to contain spirits. Far from a simple prop, the doll embodies the intersection of life, death, and the spirit world, underscoring how these supernatural ideas remain central to Javanese culture.

While previous studies have examined Indonesian horror films, few have specifically analyzed how they integrate local folklore to resonate with both national and international audiences. This study seeks to address this gap by examining how *Nini Thowok* reflects Indonesian cultural beliefs within the horror genre. By analyzing the film's cultural and narrative elements, this paper aims to highlight why it is an essential subject of study in the context of Indonesian horror cinema and explore how it keeps local folklore alive through a contemporary cinematic lens.

Popular culture refers to the practices, beliefs, and objects shared by large groups of people, often reflecting societal concerns (Storey, 2015). In Indonesia, horror films have become a staple of popular culture, with many of them deeply rooted in the country's spiritual and supernatural beliefs. This strong connection between horror films and local culture creates a unique lens through which societal fears and anxieties are explored. According to Heryanto (2014), the widespread belief in supernatural forces, influenced by indigenous traditions and religious teachings, has made horror a particularly resonant genre for Indonesian audiences.

Indonesian horror films stand out because they frequently draw from local folklore, making them resonate deeply with viewers. Heider (1991) emphasizes that these films reflect spiritual concerns, particularly the fear of the afterlife and spirits. As urbanization and

modernization continue to shape Indonesia, horror films often depict the tension between these changes and traditional spiritual practices (Heryanto, 2014).

Recent studies highlight the growing international appeal of Indonesian horror films due to their cultural specificity and the way they adapt traditional myths to contemporary settings (Safitri & Waryanti, 2024). By incorporating local beliefs, such as the *kuntilanak* or *pocong*, into their narratives, these films blend authenticity with modern horror techniques to engage a broader audience.

Moreover, Karl Heider (1991) emphasizes that Indonesian horror films often highlight the tension between modern life and traditional spiritual practices. As Indonesia becomes more urbanized and modernized, these films serve as a reminder of the country's spiritual roots. They also explore the consequences of abandoning traditional beliefs in favor of modern conveniences. This makes the genre more than just a way to scare people; it becomes a form of cultural expression that helps Indonesians navigate their complex relationship with tradition and modernity.

Indonesian horror films are distinctive due to their deep connection to supernatural elements that are often rooted in local folklore. These films frequently depict spirits, ghosts, and the afterlife, which are central to Indonesian cultural beliefs. Karl Heider (1991) explains that the spiritual aspect of Indonesian culture is strongly reflected in its films, particularly in the horror genre, where the line between the living and the spirit world is blurred. Unlike Western horror films, where fear is often based on psychological or physical threats, Indonesian horror centers on spiritual forces that people believe continue to influence the living. This makes the horror genre a powerful medium for exploring deep cultural beliefs and anxieties about life, death, and the afterlife.

As noted by Ariel Heryanto (2014), horror films in Indonesia often serve as a reflection of the country's struggle with modernization. While cities like Jakarta are rapidly urbanizing, many parts of the country still hold onto traditional beliefs in spirits and ancestors. This tension between modernity and tradition is a common theme in Indonesian horror, where characters often face supernatural consequences for neglecting or disrespecting these ancient beliefs. Films like *Nini Thowok* explore how disturbing spiritual boundaries can lead to terrifying consequences, a theme that resonates with audiences familiar with the importance of maintaining balance between the physical and spiritual worlds (Heider, 1991; Heryanto, 2014).

Joko Anwar, a leading figure in Indonesian horror cinema, has pointed out that the success of horror films like *Pengabdian Setan* (2017) stems from their ability to draw on familiar myths and fears (Anwar, 2017). These films often incorporate local folklore, such as the *kuntilanak* or *pocong*, figures that many Indonesians have heard about since childhood. The use of these myths allows filmmakers to create stories that feel personal and relevant to their audiences, tapping into cultural fears that go beyond the screen. Moreover, by blending these traditional elements with modern cinematic techniques, such as sound design, special effects, and suspenseful storytelling, Indonesian horror films like *Nini Thowok* can both scare and engage their viewers on a deeper level (Heryanto, 2014).

Another key aspect of Indonesian horror films is their exploration of social and cultural issues through supernatural narratives. Ariel Heryanto (2014) emphasizes that horror films are not just entertainment; they often offer commentary on societal concerns such as family dynamics, gender roles, and the consequences of ignoring cultural traditions. In *Nini Thowok*, for example, the haunted guesthouse and the cursed *nini thowok* doll reflect deeper anxieties about the past's hold over the present. The film critiques modern attitudes toward spirituality, suggesting that abandoning or disrespecting traditional practices can lead to chaos and destruction (Heider, 1991; Heryanto, 2014). This thematic depth adds to the appeal of Indonesian horror films, making them both culturally significant and emotionally impactful for local audiences.

The setting of *Nini Thowok* plays a critical role in establishing the film's mood and themes. Set in an old guesthouse in Central Java, the film takes full advantage of the region's mystical reputation. According to Karl Heider (1991), Indonesian horror films often use rural or remote locations to highlight the tension between modernity and tradition. These settings, far removed from the hustle of urban life, are often seen as places where ancient spiritual practices still hold sway. In *Nini Thowok*, the guesthouse is portrayed as a place of isolation, both physically and spiritually, which adds to the feeling of dread as Nadine uncovers its dark history. The house is not just a backdrop but a character in its own right, embodying the lingering presence of the past.

The setting also reflects a broader theme in Indonesian horror, which often contrasts the modern world with traditional, mystical beliefs. Heryanto (2014) notes that horror films in Indonesia frequently depict this tension, using isolated locations to symbolize the remnants of traditional spiritual practices that are slowly being forgotten in urbanized areas. In *Nini Thowok*, the old guesthouse represents the clash between the modern life that Nadine is accustomed to and the traditional Javanese spiritual world she is forced to confront.

The plot of *Nini Thowok* follows a classic horror structure, but it is enriched by its use of Javanese folklore. The story centers around Nadine, who inherits a guesthouse from her grandmother. As she begins to restore the property, she discovers the presence of a *nini thowok* doll, a spiritual figure tied to the house's dark past. According to Ariel Heryanto (2014), many Indonesian horror films use supernatural elements as a way to explore themes of family legacy and spiritual inheritance. In *Nini Thowok*, Nadine's encounter with the haunted doll forces her to confront her family's unresolved spiritual debts, reflecting the broader cultural belief that the spirits of the past can influence the present.

The film's plot also taps into the cultural practice of ancestor veneration. As explained by Karl Heider (1991), respect for ancestors and the belief in their ongoing presence is central to Javanese spirituality. In *Nini Thowok*, the supernatural disturbances that Nadine faces are a result of her family's failure to properly honor the spirits tied to the guesthouse. This plot device is common in Indonesian horror, where characters often face consequences for neglecting traditional spiritual practices. As the story unfolds, Nadine must not only fight to save herself but also make peace with the spirits that haunt her family's past.

The characters in *Nini Thowok* are crafted in a way that reflects common tropes in horror films, but with a unique cultural twist. Nadine, the protagonist, is portrayed as a strong and independent woman, but her journey is deeply tied to her connection with her family's spiritual history. In Indonesian horror, female protagonists often have a special sensitivity to the supernatural world, which is linked to cultural beliefs about women's roles in maintaining spiritual and family harmony (Heryanto, 2014). Nadine's character is no exception, her vulnerability to the spiritual forces in the guesthouse is tied to her role as the inheritor of her family's legacy.

Moreover, the *Nini Thowok* doll, though not a person, plays a significant role in the characterization of the supernatural forces within the film. The doll is depicted as a physical embodiment of the spirit world, serving as a conduit for the ghosts that haunt Nadine's family. Karl Heider (1991) points out that objects like the *nini thowok* are often central to the plot of Indonesian horror films, as they represent the physical connection between the living and the dead. The presence of the doll drives much of the film's action, forcing Nadine to confront the unresolved spiritual debts of her ancestors.

*Nini Thowok* employs a third-person point of view, which allows the audience to observe the unfolding events from a neutral perspective. This approach is typical in horror films, where the viewer is positioned as a witness to the characters' experiences, creating a sense of detachment and helplessness. As noted by Cherry (2009), horror films often use this type of narrative structure to heighten the suspense, as the audience is aware of the danger before the characters are. In *Nini Thowok*, this point of view allows the audience to witness the supernatural occurrences as they slowly unravel, building tension as Nadine becomes increasingly entangled in the ghostly forces at play.

The third-person point of view also enhances the cultural themes in the film. By observing Nadine's journey from an external perspective, the audience is able to see the larger social and spiritual implications of her actions. As Karl Heider (1991) explains, Indonesian horror films often focus on the consequences of failing to honor traditional spiritual practices. The point of view in *Nini Thowok* allows the audience to see how Nadine's personal story is tied to broader cultural beliefs about family, spirituality, and the supernatural.

## METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative approach to analyze *Nini Thowok* within the framework of cultural studies. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), qualitative research provides an in-depth understanding of human and social phenomena, making it particularly suitable for exploring cultural themes in films. The data for this study were collected through a close reading of the film, with particular attention to its narrative structure, character development, and cultural symbolism. By employing theories of cultural representation and narrative analysis, the study examines how *Nini Thowok* reflects Javanese beliefs about the supernatural while highlighting the interplay between tradition and modernity.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

One of the central findings of this study is that *Nini Thowok* effectively utilizes Javanese folklore to construct a compelling horror narrative. The *nini thowok* doll serves as more than a simple plot device; it embodies a cultural belief in the power of spiritual objects. According to Heider (1991), objects like the *nini thowok* are significant in Javanese rituals, symbolizing the connection between the living and the dead. The film heightens this cultural fear by portraying the doll as a bridge between past spiritual practices and modern consequences.

The film also addresses the societal tension between modernization and traditional spirituality, as described by Heryanto (2014). Nadine's confrontation with the supernatural forces in the guesthouse mirrors the broader societal struggle between embracing modern life and respecting ancient beliefs. The narrative suggests that neglecting these spiritual responsibilities leads to disastrous consequences, a theme that resonates deeply with Indonesian audiences familiar with the importance of maintaining spiritual balance.

Additionally, *Nini Thowok* explores the theme of family legacy and the weight of ancestral debts. The film portrays the guesthouse as a physical manifestation of the past's influence on the present. Nadine's struggle is not only with the supernatural forces in the house but also with the unresolved spiritual obligations passed down from her ancestors. This reflects broader cultural anxieties about the role of tradition in a rapidly modernizing society. The analysis of *Nini Thowok* reveals how the film integrates traditional Javanese folklore and modern horror storytelling to reflect the intersection of Indonesia's spiritual heritage and contemporary concerns. Key findings include:

*Nini Thowok* exemplifies how Indonesian horror films draw from local folklore, utilizing supernatural elements to explore deeper cultural themes. The *nini thowok* doll, rooted in Javanese spiritual practices, is not merely a scare device but a symbolic representation of life, death, and the spirit world. This incorporation of folklore adds a layer of authenticity and cultural resonance to the narrative.

The film reflects societal tensions as Indonesia grapples with urbanization and globalization. Nadine's journey from modern urban life into the spiritual world of her family's past highlights the ongoing negotiation between traditional beliefs and contemporary lifestyles. The haunted guesthouse, a setting steeped in mysticism, serves as a microcosm for this cultural dichotomy.

A recurring theme in the film is the idea of spiritual inheritance. Nadine's struggle with the haunted doll and the guesthouse reflects a broader cultural belief that unresolved ancestral obligations can disrupt the present. This theme resonates deeply with audiences familiar with the importance of honoring ancestors in Indonesian culture.

By anchoring its narrative in culturally specific elements like the *nini thowok* doll, the film successfully engages both local and international audiences. It appeals to Indonesians through its authentic portrayal of spiritual beliefs while offering international viewers an entry point into the unique world of Indonesian horror.

The findings highlight several key aspects of how *Nini Thowok* contributes to the cultural and cinematic significance of Indonesian horror films.

The success of Indonesian horror films lies in their ability to blend the universal appeal of the horror genre with the specificity of local cultural elements. As noted by Heider (1991), the portrayal of spirits, ancestors, and the afterlife reflects Indonesia's spiritual worldview. *Nini Thowok* exemplifies this by embedding Javanese folklore into its narrative, creating a culturally immersive experience for viewers.

The film's setting—a remote guesthouse in Central Java—symbolizes the tension between modernity and tradition. This dichotomy is a recurring theme in Indonesian horror cinema, as noted by Heryanto (2014). *Nini Thowok* uses this setting to juxtapose Nadine's modern outlook with her family's spiritual legacy, illustrating the challenges of navigating a rapidly modernizing society while maintaining cultural roots.

Horror films like *Nini Thowok* serve as more than entertainment; they are a medium for exploring societal fears and anxieties. The film critiques the neglect of spiritual traditions, suggesting that such disregard can lead to dire consequences. This theme reflects a broader cultural concern about the erosion of traditional values in the face of modernization.

Recent studies (Safitri & Waryanti, 2024) indicate that the global success of Indonesian horror films is tied to their cultural authenticity. *Nini Thowok* not only preserves Javanese folklore but also adapts it for a modern cinematic audience. This balance ensures the survival of traditional narratives while making them accessible to an international audience.

The characters, particularly Nadine, are crafted to reflect the cultural nuances of Indonesian horror. Her sensitivity to the supernatural and her role as the inheritor of spiritual debts align with traditional beliefs about women's roles in maintaining family harmony. The *nini thowok* doll serves as a narrative device that bridges the human and spiritual realms, embodying unresolved tensions between the living and the dead.

The film employs suspenseful storytelling, evocative settings, and a third-person narrative perspective to engage viewers. These techniques, combined with culturally rich themes, heighten the emotional and psychological impact of the film. By immersing the audience in Nadine's journey, *Nini Thowok* effectively conveys the broader societal implications of its narrative.

## CONCLUSION

*Nini Thowok* exemplifies the unique appeal of Indonesian horror cinema by weaving traditional folklore with modern storytelling. The film's exploration of ancestral debt, cultural identity, and the tension between tradition and modernization underscores the genre's ability to serve as both cultural preservation and societal commentary. As Indonesian horror films

continue to gain international recognition, their deep cultural roots ensure they remain a distinctive and powerful medium for storytelling.

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