



REPRESENTATION OF THE SEARCH FOR IDENTITY IN THE ANIMATED FILM JUMBO: A SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS BY ROLAND BARTHES

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the representation of identity search in the Indonesian animated film Jumbo through the lens of Roland Barthes' semiotics. The research focuses on interpreting visual and narrative signs that reflect the dynamics of urban youth life in Jakarta. A qualitative descriptive-interpretative method with a single case study design was employed. Data were collected through repeated observations of the film and literature reviews, then analyzed using Barthes' three-layer semiotic framework: denotation, connotation, and myth. The findings reveal that the search for identity is represented in layered meanings. At the denotative level, signs such as the protagonist's giant body, Jakarta's traffic congestion, and bullying scenes depict physical isolation and social pressure. At the connotative level, these signs symbolize emotional alienation and identity crises caused by urban pressures. At the mythological level, the film naturalizes identity crises as an inevitable consequence of metropolitan life while reproducing the ideology of conformity as a solution to social pressure. This research contributes to the development of visual semiotics studies and communication within the context of local Indonesian animation.

Keywords: *Roland Barthes Semiotics; Identity Search; Jumbo Animated Film; Representation; Jakarta Youth*

Abstract

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis representasi pencarian jati diri dalam film animasi Indonesia berjudul *Jumbo* melalui pendekatan semiotika Roland Barthes. Fokus penelitian diarahkan pada pemaknaan tanda-tanda visual dan naratif yang merefleksikan dinamika kehidupan remaja di perkotaan Jakarta. Metode yang digunakan adalah kualitatif deskriptif-interpretatif dengan desain studi kasus tunggal. Data dikumpulkan melalui observasi berulang pada film dan studi pustaka, kemudian dianalisis menggunakan tiga tahapan semiotika Barthes: denotasi, konotasi, dan mitos. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa pencarian jati diri direpresentasikan secara berlapis. Pada tingkat denotasi, tanda-tanda seperti tubuh raksasa tokoh utama, kemacetan Jakarta, dan adegan perundungan menggambarkan isolasi fisik dan tekanan sosial. Pada tingkat konotasi, tanda-tanda tersebut melambangkan alienasi emosional dan krisis identitas akibat tekanan urban. Pada tingkat mitos, film ini menaturalisasi krisis identitas sebagai konsekuensi tak terhindarkan dari kehidupan di kota besar, sekaligus mereproduksi ideologi konformitas sebagai solusi atas tekanan sosial. Penelitian ini berkontribusi pada pengembangan kajian semiotika visual dan komunikasi dalam konteks animasi lokal Indonesia.

Kata Kunci: Semiotika Roland Barthes; Pencarian Jati Diri; Film Animasi Jumbo; Representasi; Remaja Jakarta



I. INTRODUCTION

The development of the animation sector in Indonesia shows that animated films no longer merely serve as entertainment for children, but have evolved into a medium of expression rich in meaning and symbolism, capable of depicting social realities through aesthetic and imaginative approaches. As explained in a study by Rahman and Nurhayati (2023), animation holds great potential as a means of communicating social values, including issues of identity and self-existence, which are integral parts of modern human life. This phenomenon has been further strengthened by the emergence of Indonesian animated works such as *Battle of Surabaya* (2015), *Si Juki the Movie* (2017), and *Nussa* (2021), which successfully combine local values with the latest visual technology, paving the way for local animation to not only compete industrially but also address social issues relevant to contemporary Indonesian society.

Amidst these developments, the animated film *Jumbo* emerges as an Indonesian film production that authentically and richly depicts the lives and identity searches of teenagers in Jakarta through profound visual symbolism. According to a review by Antara News (2025), this film not only provides entertainment but also depicts the social dynamics, past memories, and inner conflicts faced by teenagers and children in Jakarta's complex urban environment. Yudono (2025) added that animated films serve as an effective medium for conveying profound messages about the search for identity through visual narratives, which are not bound by physical reality but are able to reach psychology and personal experiences through a surreal and symbolic world. This superiority of the animation medium allows *Jumbo* to explore weighty themes such as alienation, social pressure, and identity crises in a more expressive and touching manner than typical live-action films.

The collective phenomenon of self-discovery during adolescence, particularly in urban areas like Jakarta, reflects the complexities involved in the formation of personal and cultural identity. Adolescence is a crucial stage in the formation of self-concept, where individuals begin to question who they are, what they want, and how they should position themselves within society. In Jakarta, as a center of urbanization and modernity, the younger generation faces an increasingly complex process of identity negotiation due to the rapid flow of globalization and social change. A study by Kartono, Zuber, and Wilujeng (2023) shows that globalization and the growth of urban industry in Jakarta have triggered a socio-cultural identity crisis due to drastic shifts in values and lifestyles. Meanwhile, research by Luhuringbudi, Kurniawan, and Ahmad (2024) highlights how globalization and neoliberal

policies are reshaping social dynamics in Jakarta and driving changes in urban identity, creating new pressures for the younger generation, who must negotiate between traditional family values and the demands of competitive global modernity.

It is in this context that the animated film *Jumbo* becomes important to analyze. The film not only presents an entertaining story but also reflects the emotional and psychological journeys of its characters in searching for identity amidst environmental pressures and rapid social change. *Jumbo*'s uniqueness lies in its ability to represent the social realities of Indonesian youth in an urban context through powerful visual symbols, such as the main character's giant body, which serves as a metaphor for feelings of "different" and alienation, Jakarta's traffic jams, which symbolize stagnant aspirations and the pressures of life, and scenes of bullying that depict the social trauma caused by conformity pressures among adolescents. In their study of the film *Jakarta vs. Everybody*, Saputra and Albab (2022) found that the film's representation of masculinity and social identity reflects the struggle of young people in big cities to find a balance between personal and social values. A similar analysis can be applied to *Jumbo* to uncover more complex visual symbols in Jakarta's youth search for identity.

A semiotic approach is crucial for understanding how films like *Jumbo* construct meaning through complex sign systems. Roland Barthes, a leading figure in modern semiotic studies, views every cultural text, including films, as a sign system containing two layers of meaning: denotation and connotation. The denotative layer refers to the literal meaning, or what is directly seen on screen, while the connotative layer relates to the ideological meaning, cultural values, or social beliefs hidden behind these signs. In his landmark work, *Mythologies* (1972), Barthes explains that signs in media can create "myths" that shape society's view of reality, where myths function to naturalize dominant ideologies, making them appear as undeniable, natural truths. Wibisono (2021) asserts that Roland Barthes's semiotic theory provides a suitable analytical framework for analyzing visual media, through its division of meaning into denotative, connotative, and mythic, allowing researchers to explore the hidden layers of meaning within visual and narrative signs. In Indonesian films, visual cues such as clothing, colors, urban spaces, and facial expressions often serve as meaningful symbols of social identity. Hidayat's (2020) study of the representation of Betawi culture in the film *Si Doel The Movie* demonstrates how local and urban symbols interact in the formation of on-screen identity, creating a hybrid representation of identity that reflects the realities of Indonesian urban society. This finding strengthens the argument that *Jumbo* can be read as a cultural text that negotiates traditional and modern values in a contemporary context.

Furthermore, young people in Jakarta grow up in an environment heavily influenced by digital media and popular culture. They seek identity through media consumption, lifestyle, and online communities. Putri (2021) in her research highlights how advertising and visual culture help shape the representation of Indonesian youth identity through signs of consumption and lifestyle aspirations. In this context, *Jumbo* serves as a cinematic reflection of the identity search of young people in Jakarta living in the digital era with all its complexities.

Based on the above description, this study aims to analyze the representation of identity search in the animated film *Jumbo* through Roland Barthes's semiotic approach. More specifically, this research will identify the denotative, connotative, and mythical meanings that emerge in the film's visualization and narrative, explain how the film *Jumbo* represents social and cultural phenomena related to youth life in Jakarta, and provide academic contributions to the development of visual communication studies and film semiotics in Indonesia, especially in the context of local animation which is still rarely studied in depth. Thus, this research is expected to enrich the scientific literature in the field of communication and open space for similar studies on Indonesian animated films as an important medium for social and cultural reflection in the contemporary era.

II. RESEARCH METHODS

This research uses a descriptive-interpretive qualitative approach with a single case study design. The object of the study is the 90-minute animated film *Jumbo* (2025). The unit of analysis includes visual and narrative cues representing the search for identity, such as the main character, urban setting, and social interactions.

Data collection was conducted through non-participant observation, with the film watched seven times to capture visual and audio details. Data were further strengthened by literature review from 15 sources, including Roland Barthes' books, SINTA-indexed journals, and media reviews. Data analysis refers to the interactive model of Miles and Huberman (1994) through three stages: data reduction, data presentation (semiotic matrix), and conclusion drawing. Data validity was maintained through source triangulation and discussions with the supervisor.

III. RESEARCH RESULTS

3.1 Denotative Analysis (Literal Meaning)

At the denotative level, the following visual cues were found:

- The main character's giant body: Depicted as a boy twice his peers' height, walking awkwardly and often looking down.

- Jakarta traffic jam: Rows of stalled vehicles, tall gray buildings, honking horns, and exhaust fumes.
- Bullying scene: Physical pushing, verbal taunts such as "strange giant!" and "fat."
- Spatial contrast: Traditional wooden house versus skyscraper with global advertising.
- Internal monologue: "I'm too big for this world."

These signs literally depict the physical isolation, pressures of urban space, and social conflict experienced by the main character.

3.2 Connotative Analysis (Cultural-Emotional Meaning)

Connotations arise from cultural associations with denotative signs:

- The giant body symbolizes feelings of "different" and alienation in the competitive environment of the school and city.
- Traffic jams become a metaphor for the stagnation of life and aspirations hampered by the hustle and bustle of modernity.
- Bullying represents the social trauma caused by the pressures of conformity among teenagers.
- The color gray creates an atmosphere of depression and urban alienation.
- Graffiti symbolizes the neglected voices of the marginalized.
- The friendship at the end of the film reflects the need for solidarity as a form of emotional resilience.

These connotations enrich the narrative with psychological and social dimensions relevant to the experiences of Jakarta's youth.

3.3 Myth Analysis (Naturalized Ideology)

At the myth level, the film *Jumbo* reproduces dominant ideologies:

- Identity crisis is naturalized as urban destiny: The giant character is seemingly destined to feel alienated in the big city, without highlighting the structural inequalities that cause it.
- Traffic jams as a natural test: Life in traffic jams is considered an inevitable part of individual struggles in the neoliberal era.
- Bullying as social natural selection: Physical differences are considered "normal" targets for ridicule, teaching conformity as a path to acceptance.
- Friendship as an individual solution: The film offers a personal solution (friendship) without criticizing the social system that creates the oppression.

This myth aligns with Saputra & Albab's (2022) findings in the film *Jakarta vs. Everybody*, where urban identity is portrayed as a negotiation between social pressures and individual adaptation. However, *Jumbo* excels in its more expressive use of animated visual symbolism.

3.4 Discussion of Findings

The analysis shows that the representation of the search for identity in *Jumbo* is not only individual but also reflects broader socio-cultural dynamics. This finding addresses the first research question: representation is displayed through layered signs—from the literal to the ideological.

Compared to previous research (Hidayat, 2020; Putri, 2021), *Jumbo* offers stronger emotional depth through the medium of animation, which allows for surreal exploration. Color, body proportions, and settings are used symbolically to construct a narrative of alienation and hope.

The strength of this study lies in the layered analysis that connects the film's text to the social context of Jakarta. However, a limitation lies in the lack of empirical data directly from teenage audiences, so the generalizability of the findings still needs to be tested through further research.

IV. CONCLUSION

The animated film *Jumbo* represents Jakarta teenagers' search for identity through a complex and layered system of signs. At the denotative level, the film depicts physical realities such as bodily differences, spatial tensions, and social interactions. At the connotative level, these signs symbolize alienation, trauma, and collective hope. At the mythical level, the film naturalizes identity crises as urban destiny and reproduces the ideology of conformity as a personal solution.

This research contributes to the development of visual semiotic studies in Indonesia, particularly in the context of local animated films. Practically, the research findings can be used by the creative industry to produce works that are not only entertaining but also socially critical. Further research is recommended to include the perspectives of adolescent audiences through focus group discussions to deepen understanding of the reception of identity representation in animated films.

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