

HEGEMONY IN HORROR: EXAMINING THE CONSTRUCTS OF FEAR IN *SIKSA KUBUR* (2024)

Ni Luh Ayu Sukmawati^{1*}; Fina Zahra²; Sheila Wijayanti³; Yinghuei Chen⁴

^{1,2}Film and Television Department, Faculty of Humanities, Universitas Jember
East Java, Indonesia 68121

³English Education, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Universitas Nahdlatul Ulama Indonesia
Center Jakarta, Indonesia 10320

⁴Department of Foreign Languages and Literature, College of Humanities and Social Sciences, Asia University
Taichung City, Taiwan 41354

¹niluh.sukmawati@unej.ac.id; ²finazahra@unej.ac.id; ³sheila.wijayanti@unusia.ac.id; ⁴yichen52@asia.edu.tw

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ABSTRACT

The present article reads Siksa Kubur (published in 2024) as a film that does more than stage religious dread for generic thrills. It argues that, in its underlying logic, fear is treated as a cultural instrument through which moral authority is secured, consent is organized, and social boundaries are policed. To clarify how this mechanism works, the article brings Baudrillard's concepts of simulacra and hyperreality into dialogue with Marxist and Gramscian accounts of hegemony. It conducts a qualitative semiotic analysis of selected scenes, key dialogues, and recurring visual motifs of religious horror. The analysis shows that it circulates fear as simulacra: signs of divine retribution and grave torment appear to authorize themselves, gradually loosening their ties to empirical social conditions and acquiring a hyperreal force. In this register, the anticipation of afterlife punishment can feel more immediate than material suffering (abuse, inequality, or institutional neglect), so that horror functions as a persuasive grammar of discipline rather than a neutral genre effect. The study's contribution lies in linking hegemony theory to a Baudrillardian account of simulation to specify the semiotic pathway by which doctrinal images are converted into experiential certainty and, in turn, into ideological consent. However, the film is not ideologically closed. Through Sita, it stages a limited but consequential disturbance, her skepticism marks a contested space where moral absolutism confronts modern doubt. Thus, Siksa Kubur positions Indonesian horror cinema as an ideological arena in which hyperreal fear can reproduce hegemonic governance while also exposing the tensions and fractures that haunt it.

Keywords: hegemony, horror cinema, semiotics, siksa kubur (2024), simulacra

INTRODUCTION

The function of horror films has often been regarded merely as entertainment. However, it is important to delve deeper into the meaning of the symbols, ideologies, and social narrative constructions embedded within them. Martin's (2019) study states that horror films—beyond serving merely as entertainment—also function as a medium for catharsis and emotional regulation, a safe simulation of threats (vicarious threat simulation), a trigger of morbid

curiosity that provides stimulation, as well as a mirror of social and cultural anxieties that allows audiences to process collective fears. Recreational horror also operates as safe, low-cost threat simulation in which fear and enjoyment co-exist when arousal is *just right*, illuminating why frightening experiences can be experienced as pleasurable (Andersen et al., 2020; Clasen et al., 2020; Scrivner et al., 2021). Moreover, observer-related factors such as morbid curiosity, perceived realness of scenes, and fearfulness—along with evaluations of disgust—shape excitement

and enjoyment during horror viewing, indicating that derealization/realism appraisals and emotion-regulation processes help determine whether fear feels rewarding (Kiss et al., 2024).

Several critical studies also demonstrate that horror films can serve as a medium for representing hegemony and constructing collective fear, which may be employed as a tool of social control, such as in authoritarian politics (Baudrillard, 1994). Studies examining film as an instrument of authoritarian propaganda indicate that horror narratives may be strategically employed to implant specific fears, ensuring the populace's continued subordination to state power (Goodall, 2020).

As in Indonesia during the New Order era, film was strategically employed to construct imaginary enemies as a means of sustaining military power. The fear disseminated through such narratives, within a society deeply infused with mystical culture, had psychological effects, rendering people vigilant toward imagined threats and subsequently accepting state protection with little resistance. This parallels Baudrillard's theory of consumer society, which posits that the moral or collective consciousness of society is now entirely shaped by the media. It illustrates that what communities perceive as frightening is often a media construction rather than an objective reality. Such a condition contributes to the formation of *discourses of fear* within the minds of individuals (McClinchey & Dimanche, 2023), where the process of emotionalization in media discourse, particularly through the construction of fear, functions as a mechanism for influencing how audiences perceive reality (Ozymenko & Larina, 2021).

Horror cinema is often understood merely as the representation of a frightening and dangerous antagonist through the figure of the ghost. Its very essence, perceived as threatening, becomes a symbol of social fear that may align with dominant power narratives. Horror operates within the affective domain through fear, positioning the body as a site of power that can either reinforce or resist dominant ideologies. For example, viewed through Fisher's Narrative Paradigm, this affective economy of fear is narratively encoded in Indonesian titles such as *Sewu Dino*, *Khanzab*, and *Waktu Maghrib*, where female bodies are scripted as conduits of monstrosity or containers of victimhood, thereby normalizing patriarchal authority (Wijaya, et al., 2025), so that female ghosts often represent anxieties surrounding *deviant women* or serve as symbols of resistance against dominant norms.

When collective fear is successfully produced, it becomes an effective mechanism of social control—making the public more inclined to comply with norms or directives, such as religious prescriptions or government policies, in order to avoid the *threat* messages conveyed through film (Marko, 2013). Horror films construct fear through cultural symbolism, supernatural elements, verbal cues, and suspenseful audiovisual structures, resulting not only

in the evocation of fear but also in the reflection of anxieties surrounding social values such as religion, tradition, and family—deliberately constructing an 'illusory' fear that is made to feel real (Rahmalina et al., 2025; Krysanova, 2023).

This is the context that Joko Anwar seeks to highlight in his work—*Siksa Kubur* (published in 2024). This film does not merely provoke debates about the afterlife; the portrayal of the character Sita has the potential to persuade viewers of the existence of the realm of the grave and judgment after death—matters that are often debated or even denied, precisely as the character of Sita attempts to construct. Since losing her parents in a suicide bombing, Sita began to doubt the very existence of religion (Amril & Dwi, 2025). Her life then revolved around a single purpose: to find the person deemed most sinful, and upon that person's death, to descend into the grave alongside them in order to prove that the torment of the grave does not exist and that religion is merely an illusion. However, such a conviction entails terrifying consequences for those who choose not to believe (Darojat et al., 2025).

The main strength of *Siksa Kubur* lies in its cinematography, which fuses social critique with symbolism. The film's color grading is dominated by brownish and grayish tones, creating a somber atmosphere laden with trauma that reflects the inner condition of its characters—particularly Sita, who struggles with trauma in her pursuit of justice. From a Marxist aesthetic perspective, every visual element carries ideological weight rather than functioning as mere neutral decoration (Sau, 2025). Echoing Marx's claim that religion is the 'opium of the people', the film's somber palette and punitive iconography render belief as an affective technology that numbs and disciplines (Marx, 1994). In a multimodal sense (through verbal and non-verbal cues), the film represents how visual aspects—such as camera movement, expression, and framing—are employed to stimulate affective fear within the minds and bodies of viewers, rather than serving purely aesthetic purposes (Krysanova, 2023).

The visual composition in *Siksa Kubur* underscores dynamics of domination and subordination. For instance, the powerful figure, Wahyu Sutarna, is frequently depicted through low-angle shots, reinforcing a sense of superiority—an effect consistent with recent experimental findings that low angles increase perceived power. In contrast, high angles reduce it (Gruber et al., 2023). In contrast, victims such as Adil or Sita are often framed through high-angle shots or confined compositions, conveying both physical and psychological entrapment; tighter shot scales and confined visual space heighten empathic focus on facial cues and stress responses to spatial constraint (Bálint et al., 2022; Chung et al., 2022). The most striking example is Wahyu's sermon scene in the nursing home, where the camera situates him in a low-angle position with an intense long take—projecting a creeping, undeniable authority; sustained shots modulate attention and arousal by minimizing editorial disruption and deepening immersion in

unfolding action (Bruckert et al., 2023). The use of whip pan heightens audience tension. It illustrates emotional instability, while the slow zoom on Sita's face emphasizes her internal conflict by amplifying viewers' attunement to micro-expressions and affective cues—consistent with evidence that specific camera movements and proximity shifts alter emotional and physiological responses (Yilmaz et al., 2023; Bálint et al., 2022).

Faradina Mufti's role as Sita is also crucial in framing the character's trajectory—from an arrogant and skeptical figure to one who becomes fragile by the film's end. The close-up on her face as she confronts the reality of the torment of the grave serves as the emotional climax that overturns her entire belief system. The film does not depict *hell* through ghostly figures but rather through the fear inscribed on the human face. This aligns with Deleuze's notion of the *affection-image*, in which the face becomes cinema's primary medium for channeling emotional intensity and generating affective experience for the audience (Escobar, 2023; Carroll, 2023). The use of close-up techniques on Sita's face functions not merely as a visual representation but also as a vessel for conveying fear and existential suffering.

In this regard, Anwar's *Siksa Kubur* can be read as a calibrated engine of social control that recruits fear to regulate meaning: by staging moral deviation and punitive consequence, the film leverages viewers' predictive processing—continually violating and updating expectations so that uncertainty itself becomes affectively aversive and norm-reinforcing (Miller et al., 2024). Its grammar of shots—especially low/high angles and level shifts that cue power asymmetries and moral threat—works as rapid visual signals the audience can decode even in single frames, amplifying the didactic force of each scene (Savardi et al., 2023). Situated within Anwar's broader corpus, where gendered bodies often bear the burden of moral anxiety, *Siksa Kubur* extends a philosophical pattern that ties transgression, gendered vulnerability, and communal order, thereby transforming fear into a cultural lesson rather than a theological indictment (Sutandio, 2024).

The central issue that arises is how *Siksa Kubur* constructs fear not only as an individual and psychological experience, but also as a collective and ideological one. This construction of fear is often shaped by power relations within society—for instance, between religious norms and deviant behavior, or between social authority and individuals who attempt to resist dominant values. In Indonesian and transnational contexts, horror frequently operates within hegemonic orders that naturalize moral hierarchies and recruit audience consent through religious and cultural frames (Mohammed, 2022; Rahmalina et al., 2025). In this sense, fear can work as a governance technology that stabilizes dominant ideologies while disciplining *deviance*, yet also opens negotiated and oppositional readings (Adiprasetyo, 2023; Yakali, 2024). Recent case studies show how

films stage struggles among clerical authority, the state, and lay subjects, revealing how consent and coercion intertwine within a Gramscian logic of hegemony (Wijaya et al., 2025). At the same time, popular cinema can mobilize counter-hegemony, reframing symbols and gendered power to challenge prevailing norms (Mardhika & Agustin, 2025). Thus, in *Siksa Kubur*, fear may be understood not merely as affect, but as a mechanism for sustaining and sometimes contesting the dominance of particular ideologies (Mohammed, 2022; Adiprasetyo, 2023).

Previous studies on Indonesian horror films have tended to focus on aesthetic aspects (visuals, sound, narrative) or on their psychological effects on audiences (Rahmalina et al., 2025). However, there remains a limited body of research that connects horror with the dimension of hegemony and examines how fear is constructed to reproduce or challenge dominant ideologies (Adiprasetyo, 2023). However, it is important to consider the affective needs of individuals—how these moderate the experience of watching horror. The aim is to explain variations in audience reception (personal identification versus collective reaction), bearing in mind that audiences are not a homogeneous mass. This creates a research gap, particularly in the context of contemporary Indonesian horror films, which have become increasingly complex in addressing social, political, and religious issues.

Although Indonesian horror scholarship has expanded rapidly—often mapping genre conventions, folklore repertoires, audiovisual style, and audience psychology—much of this work still treats fear as an effect to be described rather than as a mechanism to be explained. What remains less explicit, in other words, is how fear becomes *politically effective*, how it moves from a moment of spectatorship into a cultural force that organizes consent. As Baudrillard (1994) insisted, the contemporary problem is not simply representation but simulation—those situations in which signs circulate without stable referents and nonetheless acquire the *feel* of truth. Images are no longer merely depictions of reality; they begin to *produce* reality-effects, affective certainties that can harden through repetition until they appear self-evident. This is the terrain of hyperreality, where the world becomes more realistic than the real one, not because it is truer, but because it is stabilized through circulating models that feel experientially compelling (Baudrillard, 1994).

This Baudrillardian orientation matters for contemporary religious horror, where doctrinal images (grave torment, divine punishment, eschatological threat) are not simply themes but are often intensified into sensory regimes that compete with everyday social concerns. The question, then, is not only what such images *mean*, but what they *do*: how they shape what audiences experience as urgent, morally binding, and real enough to govern conduct. Put plainly, much research shows that horror produces anxiety or catharsis, yet fewer explain how fear becomes a governable cultural force—able to discipline perception, legitimate authority, and displace attention

from material contradictions such as inequality, abuse, and institutional neglect.

Drawing on Gramsci's framework of hegemony, *Siksa Kubur* can therefore be approached as a cultural text that is not neutral but is saturated with attempts to secure and manage consent through fear, even as it leaves room for tension (Gramsci, 1971). Accordingly, this study analyzes how the film mobilizes religious-horror imagery and cinematic form as an ideological instrument, asking: how does *Siksa Kubur* construct fear, and in what ways does that fear function as a tool for the reproduction of hegemony?

METHODS

Baudrillard's framework is useful here because it refuses the assumption that cinematic signs operate as neutral representations that point back to a stable reality. Instead, it foregrounds a semiotic situation in which signifiers circulate with increasingly weakened anchors to referents, and meaning is generated through relations among signifiers, through *models* rather than through reflective, dialectical thought that returns interpretation to an external ground. Pawlett (2007) clearly explains this shift that simulation differs from representation when signifiers are detached from both their signifieds and real-world referents. In simulation, signs are generated from pre-existing models that, strictly speaking, have no external referents. Therefore, simulation is not merely an inferior copy of reality; it describes a regime in which signs produce reality-effects by circulating as if they authorize themselves.

Hyperreality is a condition in which the world becomes *more real than real*, not because it is more truthful, but because it is produced, intensified, and stabilized through the circulation of models and images that feel experientially compelling. Hyperreality emerges through the entwined logic of simulacra (copies without secure originals) and the proliferation of screens, where images multiply, repeat, and amplify until they begin to eclipse the empirical world. In everyday usage, *simulation* often refers to an imitation that remains bracketed as not-the-real—something that can be paused, suspended, or exited. For Baudrillard, however, simulation hardens into simulacra when representations become so detached from external reference that they no longer represent anything outside themselves, yet still acquire the capacity to organize perception, affect, and conduct (Baudrillard, 1994; Engell, 2024). Simulacra, in this view, do not simply mirror reality; they can replace the criteria through which reality is recognized and evaluated.

Baudrillard further suggests that simulacra unfold historically across different orders, from counterfeit illusion to industrial serial reproduction, to a third order in which simulation fully eclipses representation. Although this schema is often discussed in relation to late-modern media saturation, it is methodologically relevant for film analysis

because it clarifies how images can operate as models that organize expectation, affect, and social meaning without requiring a stable referent outside the text. In the present study, this orientation guides the analysis of how religious-horror signifiers like images of punishment, grave torment, and doctrinal certainty can circulate as self-validating models, generating a hyperreal immediacy that competes with, and may even displace, empirical social concerns. Fear, accordingly, is approached not only as a psychological response but as a semiotic effect produced through the circulation and stabilization of such models.

On this basis, the study operationalizes Baudrillard's account of simulation, read as a radical or postmodern semiotic framework, through a qualitative semiotic method designed to trace how religious-horror signs circulate, stabilize, and intensify as models of fear within the film's scenes, dialogue, and visual motifs. The research adopted a qualitative approach utilizing semiotic analysis (Song et al., 2025). The study drew on Baudrillard's theory of simulacra and hyperreality, interpreted within the framework of radical or postmodern semiotics (Baudrillard, 1994). Baudrillard's framework, emerging from semiology and evolving into a critique of representation beyond conventional sign relations, served as the central reference in this study for analyzing the construction of religious fear in horror cinema.

Baudrillard's thought critiques structuralist semiotics' focus on stable meaning, proposing that signs operate not solely as representations of reality but can function independently to produce new realities. Such realities are termed simulacra, copies devoid of an original referent (Baudrillard, 1994). The theory provides a basis for radical semiotics, interpreting signs as powers capable of constructing simulated realities, thereby emphasizing the divergence between traditional semiotics and Baudrillard's postmodern framework.

The concept of hyperreality arises from simulacra, describing a condition in which representations are experienced as more real than empirical reality. In this context, images cease to mirror reality merely and instead constitute reality itself. In horror cinema, portrayals of grave torment or hellish punishment are rendered more terrifying than tangible social phenomena such as poverty or abuse (Kellner, 2019). This notion highlights how Baudrillard's theory transcends conventional semiotics, emphasizing that images do more than generate meaning—they actively shape and govern social experience.

The object of this study is Joko Anwar's *Siksa Kubur* (2024). The primary data were drawn from the film's scenes, dialogues, and visualizations that depict religious horror. Supporting data were obtained from books, journals, articles, and literature on semiotics, simulacra, hyperreality, and horror within a sociocultural context (Grgić, 2024; Sanz-Aznar et al., 2023). The rationale for selecting this film rested on the view that its depiction of religious horror encapsulates fear constructions that function as simulacra. At the

same time, its enactment of hyperreality in social contexts makes it particularly suitable for application of Baudrillard's theoretical framework.

Analysis was carried out in four phases: first, the identification of signs, images, and narrative elements that evoke fear; second, the interpretation of these signs as simulacra, operating independently of any empirical reality (Baudrillard, 1994; Engell, 2024); third, the examination of instances of hyperreality, in which the depiction of religious horror surpasses empirical reality in perceived intensity; and finally, the interpretation of findings within a sociocultural framework to elucidate how the film mobilizes horror as a hyperreal, hegemonically effective phenomenon (Kellner, 2019). By following these stages, the research seeks to highlight Baudrillard's theory as a radical semiotic framework adept at elucidating contemporary cultural representational phenomena.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

In *Siksa Kubur*, fear emerges from cultural anxieties surrounding sin, death, and supernatural retribution—experiences that are socially constructed rather than purely spiritual. Baudrillard conceptualizes such phenomena as simulacra, wherein the unreal wields greater impact than empirical reality. His notions of simulacra and hyperreality provide a framework to understand how horror operates as a hegemonic mechanism influencing individual perception. Within postmodern contexts, representations do not merely reflect reality but anticipate it, generating models of reality without origin or referent, thereby producing hyperreality (Baudrillard, 1994).

Baudrillard's notion of simulacra offers a pivotal framework for analyzing how fear in horror cinema originates not merely from empirical reality but from signs and images that construct and replicate representations (Clist, 2022; van Kessel et al., 2025). In *Siksa Kubur*, fear transcends individual religious experience. It is reconfigured into visual, narrative, and symbolic sequences that enact a hyperreal reality—where supernatural punishment, death's retribution, and the ramifications of sin are amplified until the induced fear eclipses reality itself (Sommerer, 2025; van Kessel et al., 2025).

Simulacra, understood as *copies without originals*, allow signs or images to stand independently, appearing real despite lacking reference to empirical reality. In horror cinema, such hyperreal fear causes audiences to dread ghosts or curses that are purely fictional, yet the constructions have real effects on cognition and behavior. States can manipulate this phenomenon by embedding ideological agendas into horror narratives, producing simulations that obscure fact from fiction to influence public opinion. Baudrillard further suggests that media, including film, may covertly support the perpetuation of economic and geopolitical power structures. Fear propagated through media thus operates as a mechanism for

sustaining existing hierarchies. In *Siksa Kubur*, religiously-inflected simulations are prominent: depictions of hell or grave punishment are rendered so terrifyingly that they are experienced as more immediate than mundane worldly problems. This hyperreal fear traps audiences within the viewpoints prescribed by authorities, inducing compliance with religious norms and institutional regulations under the guise of personal safety.

In consonance with Baudrillard's simulacra, Gramsci conceives of cultural texts as inherently political, embedding both the reinforcement and contestation of dominant discourses through fear. In *Siksa Kubur*, religiously-infused hegemony is highly salient, intersecting with social critique of the state, ideological apparatuses, and vested interest groups that manipulate society, often leading individuals astray. This dynamic is illustrated through Sita and Adil, siblings who lose their parents in a suicide bombing outside their bakery and are placed in an Islamic boarding school (*pesantren*).

Instead of functioning as a secure environment for the transmission of authentic religious teachings, Anwar frames the *pesantren* as a site of horror. Religious doctrines regarding the punishments of the grave (*Barzakh*) are delivered in a starkly intimidating manner to instill obedience among students to the prevailing system. While Sita exhibits critical agency by challenging the sect she deems erroneous, her younger brother Adil becomes vulnerable to the abuse of power, experiencing sexual assault perpetrated by Wahyu—a man socially venerated and afforded status owing to his position as the *pesantren's* main benefactor.

In *Siksa Kubur*, Wahyu represents a dual hegemonic figure: on one hand, he appears as a religious leader and mentor with legitimate spiritual authority, while on the other, he functions as a businessman with a strong socioeconomic network. This dual position renders him not only a moral authority but also a social actor whose power aligns with elite structures. However, beneath his philanthropic image as a donor, Wahyu exhibits abuse of power, using his religious authority to conceal sexual violence inflicted upon the children under his care. This phenomenon is exacerbated by the silence of educators who are aware of these transgressions, transforming an institution that should serve as a protective space into a mechanism for reproducing repressive power.

The *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school) in *Siksa Kubur* operates as an ideological state apparatus, understood in Althusser's terms as a private institution that exercises authority with relative autonomy, often positioning itself above the law by mobilizing ideology (Althusser, 1971). The ideology enacted within this context, rather than elevating divine principles, legitimizes the dominance of Wahyu—the *pesantren's* principal benefactor—who assumes the role of a bourgeois figure exerting authoritative control over the institution. Moreover, consistent with Althusser's assertion that no apparatus of ideology exists in a

purely ideological form, the *pesantren* simultaneously functions as a repressive state apparatus. This becomes evident in the disciplinary measures imposed upon Sita, whose attempt to escape is sanctioned by forcing her to wear a conspicuously colored veil as a visible marker of sin. Paradoxically, the transgression in question does not constitute a violation of religious doctrine but rather an infraction against capitalist ideology.

Siksa Kubur illustrates how hegemonic authority functions via the manipulation of religious symbols and discourses, especially when dogmatic teachings are distorted to suppress victims and normalize domination. The fear induced by threats of grave punishment outweighs the impact of physical violence, enforcing obedience to deviant authority. Consequently, the film situates horror both in supernatural manifestations and in the reflection of power abuses sanctioned under misused religious representation.

This constitutes a hyperreal condition in which constructed beliefs about the afterlife exert a greater influence on behavior than the immediate empirical reality. Baudrillard refers to this as hegemonic simulacra, wherein fear of supernatural punishment is produced and reproduced to ensure obedience—even when the underlying intentions are misguided and the teachings distorted. Furthermore, he interprets this situation as the loss of the original referent: religious teachings that should provide solace instead generate anxiety, creating an irony in which *dhikr* and prayer are employed like horror incantations in the film, subverting their spiritual meaning.

In addition to religious critique, *Siksa Kubur* addresses hegemonic dynamics within economic and global frameworks. The opening tragedy highlights asymmetric competition between local and foreign enterprises: the Sita-Adil family operates *The Guns*, a traditional bakery, yet loses customers to a neighboring international franchise. This economic strain catalyzes ideological tensions. The bomber responsible for the attack embodies this conflict, seeking martyrdom to evade grave punishment while simultaneously opposing foreign capitalist symbols.

Following the radical attack, the siblings Sita and Adil experience the loss of their parents and enter a highly doctrinaire educational system. This narrative underscores the global ideological clash—capitalism versus religious fundamentalism—with ordinary and vulnerable communities bearing the brunt. Economic domination by foreign franchises displaces local social structures, while extremist religious sects manipulate ideology to justify violence, including suicide bombings based on impure or unorthodox interpretations of sacred texts.

The narrative of *Siksa Kubur* dramatizes the state's absence or negligence, as post-suicide bombing management is delegated to religious institutions (*pesantren*) without adequate oversight, revealing the state's failure to protect its citizens from these dual threats, including the safeguarding of Sita's family.

Orphaned children are handed over to religious organizations without proper supervision. From a Marxist perspective, the state in this film fails in its function of social reproduction. It is absent at critical moments, transferring caregiving responsibilities to religious institutions that prove to be corrupt.

Gramsci's view proves particularly pertinent here, as the pursuit of hegemony inherently involves contesting dominant discourse through fear (Gramsci, 1971). Analyzed from the perspective of narrative aesthetics informed by Marx, *Siksa Kubur* is saturated with symbols of resistance against the ideological impositions of specific non-neutral actors. The suicide bombing in front of the Sita-Adil family bakery, *The Guns*, and its inability to compete with the adjacent American franchise, epitomizes the face of global capitalism. According to Rendell (2024), a Marxist geographer, this process is termed *accumulation by dispossession*. Local economies are marginalized, communities disrupted, and ordinary people lose both employment and identity. In the film, this generates an extreme reaction in the form of a suicide bombing. The perpetrator claims to be *fighting capitalism and seeking liberation from punishment in the grave*, reflecting a mixture of anti-Western ideology and misinterpreted religious teachings.

Within a socioeconomic lens, the film's depiction of conflict between local businesses and foreign franchises (specifically American) functions not as mere backdrop but as an intentional narrative of symbolic resistance, highlighting how global capitalist ideology can trigger counter-ideological responses. Although the struggle unfolds above the populace, its consequences dismantle community foundations, with family livelihoods destroyed and children placed in abusive institutions. Ironically, this conflict is neglected by the state. More than that, the state, through its ideological apparatuses, actively perpetuates capitalist ideology under the guise of religion. This is evident in the way the post-suicide bombing response is delegated to a religious institution (the *pesantren*), itself marked by corruption.

Nevertheless, *Siksa Kubur* successfully personifies the hegemony of religion and the state through the character of Wahyu and the *pesantren* institution. Both appear terrifying, akin to ghosts to be feared, yet their existence is highly realistic rooted in social reality (corrupt religious leaders, repressive *pesantren*, trauma from a suicide bombing). The horror in the film is not merely derived from conventional supernatural entities, but from dominant institutions that ought to be virtuous yet instead oppressed. The film provides a clear depiction of the simulacra construction, as posited by Baudrillard, illustrating how fear generated by social environments or media produces a distorted reality that can even supplant empirical reality itself.

Behind the terrifying scenes and dogma concerning punishment in the grave lies an even more frightening message: how power can infiltrate the human body and mind through fear. Here, Marxism

remains relevant for uncovering layers hidden beneath the surface (Arvon, 2010). Sita and Adil, two orphans resulting from a suicide bombing, are sent to a *pesantren*. Instead of serving as a place of healing, the *pesantren* becomes a spiritual prison. Doctrine regarding grave punishment is taught through fear, inducing guilt and compelling the students to submit. This is not merely a matter of belief but of how fear is employed as a mechanism of mental control.

From Marx's perspective, religion can function as the *opium of the people*, not implying that religion is inherently wrong, but because it is often used to console while dulling the critical consciousness of the oppressed. In *Siksa Kubur*, the dogma concerning punishment in the grave feels more tangible than the physical violence endured by children in the *pesantren*. Fear of the afterlife becomes a powerful tool to ensure compliance without the need for direct threats.

Wahyu serves as a key figure representing the duality of power. The film foregrounds the tension between reality and hyperreality, manifested through his character: on one side, he exudes authority and inevitability as a philanthropic economic elite and a respected religious figure; on the other, he enacts egregious abuses, including sexual assault of boys in the *pesantren*. Through this duality, Anwar cultivates a critical discursive lens for viewers to contemplate what forms of punishment or retribution might await such an individual in the afterlife.

The film's terror is not limited to the perpetration of heinous acts, but encompasses the systemic distortion of justice, evident in the silence of teachers and administrators who are aware yet choose inaction. It demonstrates how institutions may serve to safeguard power rather than victims, driven by aligned interests or ideological conformity. Here, religious institutions that should provide protection instead reinforce authority, are constrained by fear of the donor's influence. Echoing Marx's view that hegemony involves both economic control and the normalization of injustice through ideology and social practices, this depiction reveals the cultural functions of hegemonic power (Saul, 2025). Religious and educational institutions can serve as instruments that reproduce and safeguard power relations, rather than protect victims, by enforcing norms that preserve the donor's status, official positions, and the institution's reputation (Slothuus, 2021).

In line with Marx, Gramsci's notion of hegemony views power as exercised less through coercion and more through social consent and the legitimacy granted by the dominant class (Gramsci, 1971). Wahyu does not need to issue direct threats; his authority and social standing are enough to maintain the obedience and silence of those around him. In Baudrillardian terms, simulacra and hyperreality suggest that the silence of actors or institutions in confronting oppression often arises from fear of hierarchical power relations. Here, fear produced by social, political, or media contexts shapes a reality that becomes distorted, potentially substituting for empirical reality itself.

Siksa Kubur depicts the intersection of capitalist exploitation and religious extremism in the absence of state intervention. Global capitalist forces erode local economic stability, while fundamentalist ideologies entice self-sacrifice with assurances of spiritual reward. Ordinary individuals, such as Sita and Adil, are caught in this ideological struggle. Following the bombing, the state is largely absent, offering no remedial or psychological support; the children are simply placed in a *pesantren*, highlighting institutional neglect.

The film succeeds in portraying the state as a duplicitous institution—where the threat of violence posed by radical groups (so-called heretical sects) becomes a framing device for fear, ultimately distorting the state's alignment with capitalism under the guise of religious doctrine. From a Marxist lens, the state is rarely neutral, often acting to safeguard existing elite interests and power hierarchies. In *Siksa Kubur*, the state delegates traumatized citizens to heterodox religious institutions, resulting in cycles of violence rather than healing.

In *Siksa Kubur*, power is manifested not only through physical actions but also operates subtly within the psychic realm. Fear of grave torment creates a form of hyperreality, as articulated by Baudrillard, wherein representations of imaginary phenomena—such as the afterlife, divine punishment, or demons—exert a more dominant impact than concrete realities like abuse, poverty, or trauma. Ultimately, the film conveys a simulacrum of power as a message, in which religion, the state, and capitalist structures generate a constructed reality that feels authentic. The students' fear of dying impurely outweighs the fear of worldly suffering—not due to naivety, but because they have been systematically conditioned. The system is intentionally structured to resist challenges.

Within the horror construction presented in *Siksa Kubur*, the majority of characters are depicted as conforming to the narrative of terror: they are fearful, submissive, and accept supernatural punishment as an absolute certainty. However, the presence of the character Sita introduces a dissonance to this dominant pattern. She is not merely a witness to the terror surrounding her but positions herself as a subject who questions the singular truth imposed by the system. From a hegemony theory perspective, Sita embodies resistance, as her existence reveals a space of negotiation between the individual and constraining ideological power.

Amid the terror produced by the deviant ideological paradigm, Sita emerges as a symbol of hope. She questions teachings long regarded as absolute and pure, seeking alternative meanings of life, death, and faith. She embodies what is termed critical consciousness in Marxist theory. Such consciousness can serve as the starting point for social transformation. According to Marx, change will not occur if the proletariat remains unaware of their oppression (Marx, 1970). Sita, fully aware, recognizes that she, her younger brother, and the other students

are victims of a larger system. Her struggle represents a form of counter-hegemony, resisting the dominant narrative that subjugates.

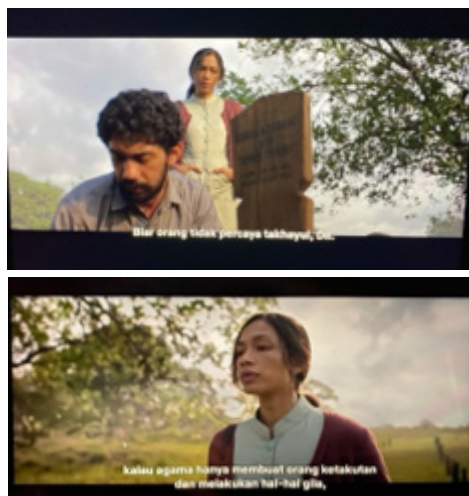


Figure 1 Sita challenges the belief in grave torment
(Source: Netflix, *Siksa Kubur*, Timecode 44:50)

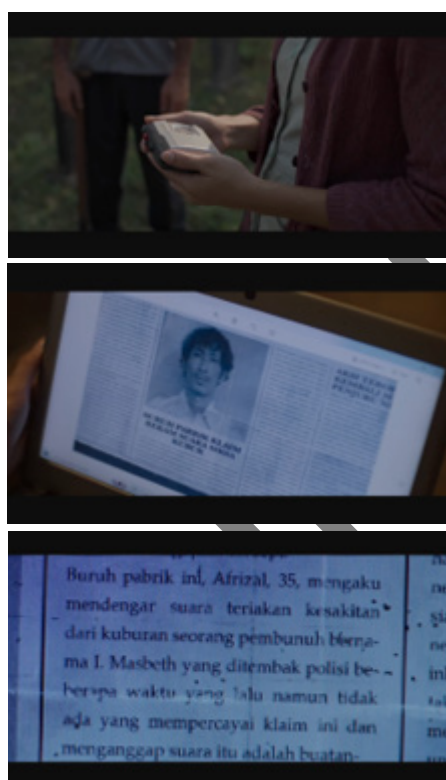


Figure 2 Sita's search for the truth of the cassette recording
handed to her by Afrizal
(Source: Netflix, *Siksa Kubur*, Timecode 45:51-46:54)

Figure 1 depicts Sita, embodying critical consciousness, consistently questioning fear-inducing religious doctrines that suppress rational thought. Within the context of narrative text analysis, Sita even states, "If religion only makes people fearful and drives them to do crazy things." The excerpt serves as a symbol of resistance that marks the shift from

passive fear to active awareness. Sita functions as a representative figure of what Arendt (1998) describes as *vita activa*, a framework of human activity divided into three dimensions: labor (activities aimed at biological survival), work (productive creation), and action (sociopolitical engagement). The majority of characters in *Siksa Kubur* are confined within the *labor* dimension, existing merely to meet basic biological needs and submitting uncritically to societal rules (Zembylas, 2025). In contrast, Sita progresses to the *action* dimension; she articulates her thoughts, poses critical questions, and engages in ethical conduct that enters the public realm of judgment and responsibility (McRobbie, 2024). This progression embodies, according to Arendt, the highest realization of human existence, aligning with readings that foreground spectatorship, action, and political appearance as core to Arendt's critique of mass politics (Zeldes-Roth, 2024).

Siksa Kubur presents horror implicitly, emphasizing symbolic resistance against oppression by deviant groups acting under the guise of religion (Berry, 2025). These groups employ instruments of fear embedded in a hyperreal framework, continuously reinforced based on flawed paradigms (Nummenmaa, 2024). This illustrates how Indonesian society is highly susceptible to ideologies that deviate even from authentic religious teachings. At this stage, Joko Anwar uses horror as a medium of critique, exposing how institutions meant to protect can instead become sources of oppressive power. Religion is mobilized as a tool of control, capitalism undermines the livelihoods of ordinary people, and the state remains absent when citizens experience trauma. Within this context, the character of Sita emerges as a figure of counter-hegemony, standing at the gravesite with an expression of resolute determination.

The portrayal of Sita convinces viewers that momentarily setting aside fear can function as a shield—a tool for critical thinking. The close-up depiction of Sita (Figure 1) serves as a determinant symbol of resistance and a moral message, directed both internally—to Adil within the film, and externally, to the audience at large which encourages engagement in the *action* dimension.

Across the sequence of Figure 2, Sita's search for the truth of the cassette recording handed to her by Afrizal—a factory worker and former *pesantren* student entangled with the suicide-bombing episode—marks a crucial moment in which the film suggests that reality is no longer secured by empirical verification but by the circulation of signs that generate *real effects*. The tape does not function merely as evidence awaiting authentication; it operates as a model that solicits belief precisely because it travels as something that *sounds* authentic. The voice, the hiss of the tape, the degraded audio quality, and the aura of an archival document make it appear anchored in a solid referent. In Baudrillardian terms, this is the point at which the sign no longer serves a stable reality as its ground; it begins to produce its own reality-effect—often more

persuasive than any fact that may never be directly accessible. Sita's doubt ("*is this true or not?*"), therefore, opens onto what is at stake: a regime of simulation in which the cassette becomes an apparatus that sorts what counts as real, while its supposed sources (Afrizal, the *pesantren*, collective trauma, and the news media) remain suspended in a haze of mediation.

The force of the scene lies in a distinctly Baudrillardian irony: the more Sita tries to separate the authentic from the fabricated, the more she is drawn into the logic of simulacra, because authenticity is now measured through the cohesion between signs rather than through any recoverable origin. The recording acts like proof that governs emotion and conduct: it calls forth fear, curiosity, and the desire to seal the gap of uncertainty, and it is precisely there that hyperreality congeals. A sound that cannot necessarily be forensically verified appears *more real than real* because it binds Sita's experience (and the viewer's) to an intensified sense of presence, as if suffering, torment, or the *voice of the grave* becomes sufficiently really simply by being heard. The film thus implies that religious fear does not need theological or empirical validation; it only needs to be repeated, circulated, and believed in order to function as a mechanism of discipline. In this position, Sita is not only a figure of counter-hegemony who resists dogma, but also a subject testing the limits of her own resistance: she seeks to break the simulation, yet the very tool she uses to contest it (the cassette) becomes the sign most capable of expanding the simulation. In Arendt's terms, what shifts here is the status of factual truth: rather than being tested through judgment within a shared common world, *the real* is decided by whatever can successfully appear and circulate as convincing evidence—so the cassette functions not merely as a medium, but as a device that regulates appearance and short-circuits public judgment into compliance with an evidence that feels final.

In line with Arendt's perspective, action constitutes a form of human activity that cannot be reduced to labor or production. It represents an expression of freedom and the courage to initiate something new (Krysanova, 2023). Sita's actions, consistently questioning religious authority and narratives about hell, are not merely acts of rebellion; they constitute the inception of an authentic public sphere—a space where dialogue and equality can flourish. As Arendt notes, human action is inherently unpredictable and irreversible, yet within it lies the potential for social change and the formation of new solidarities (Arendt, 1998). Sita initiates this action through concrete deeds, firmly refusing to submit to dogma that, in this case, has been distorted.

CONCLUSIONS

Siksa Kubur demonstrates its cultural representational value, showing that horror can reflect

state hegemony through religious channels. It serves as a medium to legitimize moral authority, disseminate religious norms, and regulate social behavior through fear of divine punishment, which deviant groups often exploit. Hegemony operates subtly through moral absolutism embedded in dialogue and visual metaphors, positioning certain beliefs as indisputable truths. However, traces of ideological negotiation emerge, reflecting contemporary tensions between traditional morality and modern skepticism.

The narrative of fear is constructed through supernatural entities or religious dogma, functioning as simulacra of state power. From a Marxist perspective, the film invites viewers to recognize that power does not always manifest in the form of weapons or law enforcement; it can be present in prayers, the smiles of religious authorities, or even promotional offers from foreign franchises. Behind these seemingly benign forms, a system perpetuates inequality and suffering. Although Marx lived in the 19th century, the horror he described continues to pervade contemporary life. *Siksa Kubur* exposes the dark side of religious institutions—deviant or corrupted teachings—used to control vulnerable groups through the instrument of fear of posthumous punishment.

Siksa Kubur functions as a form of self-critique toward existing power structures. The film reflects the reality that collective fear can operate as a tool of control, while simultaneously challenging audiences to recognize the construction of that fear. By embedding social context, Joko Anwar successfully leverages the horror genre as a medium for both reminder and symbolic resistance. Viewers are prompted to question whether the objects of their fear are truly real, or merely political simulations crafted by authorities pursuing worldly interests.

Ultimately, horror films can reinforce hegemony if they merely exploit fear to maintain the status quo; conversely, they can serve as a medium of cultural resistance when they succeed in exposing the political and ideological *ghosts* that haunt real life. As Baudrillard suggests, in an era of simulation it becomes crucial to distinguish between reality and the fear-images that circulate as if they were reality itself. *Siksa Kubur*, therefore, enables audiences to perceive the shadows of power behind the spectacle of terror. However, the present reading remains a close textual account of how those shadows are *made legible* in cinematic form, which is why the following section clarifies the study's limitations and outlines directions for future research.

Future research can extend this close textual reading in at least three productive directions. First, audience-centered studies, reception analysis, digital ethnography, or survey-based approaches could test how viewers actually interpret the film's religious signs and whether fear of posthumous punishment is experienced as moral guidance, institutional critique, or entertainment, thereby bridging the gap between textual meaning and lived ideology. Second, multimodal production research (interviews with

filmmakers, analysis of marketing paratexts, platform algorithms, and censorship/distribution contexts) could clarify how religious imagery is selected, amplified, and circulated, and how industrial constraints shape what becomes legible as critique. Together, these approaches would move beyond semiotic description toward a fuller account of how cinematic fear travels across texts, audiences, and infrastructures, while refining the limits of simulation and hegemony as explanatory frameworks in contemporary Indonesian horror.

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Data Availability Statement: Data subject to third party restrictions. The data that support the findings of this study are available from **Netflix**. Restrictions apply to the availability of these data, which were used under license for this study. The film **Siksa Kubur (2024)** is available to Netflix subscribers via the Netflix platform; access is subject to Netflix's terms of use. Data are available from Netflix with the permission of the third party (Netflix).

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