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Cultural Reframing of Children's Songs in Horror Cinema: A Semiotic Perspective

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Abstract Children's songs have long been embedded in Indonesian cultural memory as symbols of innocence, emotional comfort, and childhood intimacy. This study examined the recontextualization of children's songs in Indonesian horror cinema using a cultural semiotic approach. Focusing on four films, Danur: I Can See the Ghost (2017), Danur 3: Sunyaruri (2019), Oo Nina Bobo (2014), and Tulah (2023), it analyzes how songs traditionally associated with childhood innocence and emotional security are transformed into carriers of fear and supernatural meaning. Guided by Roland Barthes' semiotic framework, the findings revealed a significant shift from denotative to connotative meanings through processes such as repetition, tonal distortion, and alignment with unsettling narrative contexts. This transformation generates emotional dissonance, as audiences are compelled to reconcile familiar auditory experiences with disturbing visual imagery, reinforcing tension and psychological unease. Overall, the study highlighted how horror movies mobilized culturally familiar sounds to construct fear, demonstrating that horror emerged from the transformation of intimate cultural elements.

Keywords: *Children's songs, Indonesian horror cinema, Semiotics, Cultural symbolism, Barthes' semiotic framework*

1. Introduction

Culture has a significant impact on how meaning, emotion, and symbolism are formed and perceived within cinematic text. In Indonesian society, cultural expressions such as folklore, rituals, and traditional songs serve as repositories of collective memory, transmitting values, beliefs, and emotional associations across generations. Among these, children's songs occupy a unique position, as they are closely tied to early socialization, familial intimacy, and a sense of emotional security. These songs are not merely musical forms but culturally embedded symbols that reflect shared experiences of childhood, care, and belonging. This symbolic, culture-laden function of music extends beyond childhood into broader artistic traditions, for since antiquity, concepts such as *catharsis* and *mimesis* have framed music as both an emotional outlet and a representational form of reality (D'Artenay, 2019). In everyday life, music functions not only as entertainment

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but also as a coping mechanism for emotional strain and boredom (El-Nashar & Nayef, 2023; Heng et al., 2018). Within audiovisual media, particularly cinema, these affective dimensions are further amplified, as music operates alongside visual elements to construct narrative meaning and emotional engagement. It is especially evident in the horror genre, where sound and musical composition play a crucial role in generating tension, fear, and psychological unease. At the same time, children's songs, especially lullabies, have been culturally associated with innocence, emotional security, and early socialization, functioning as repositories of collective memory and moral instruction across generations (Anzak et al., 2019; Chao-Fernández et al., 2020).

Although scholarship on music in film and the cultural significance of children's songs has developed considerably, the intersection between these two domains has received relatively limited and uneven attention, particularly in non-Western music. Much of the existing literature tends to emphasize Western horror cinema (Bickerdike, 2025; Stone, 2025) or address music primarily from the perspective of general sound design (Chaurasia & Majhi, 2023; Hossain & Deb, 2025), while discussions of culturally specific musical forms as semiotic resources remain comparatively less foregrounded. Indonesian children's songs such as *Gilang Sipaku Gelang*, *Nina Bobo*, *Boneka Abdi*, and *Hujan Pergilah* (sleep, my child, my doll, and rain go away), traditionally associated with playfulness, comfort, and nostalgia, are frequently recontextualized within horror narratives involving death, haunting, and the supernatural (Anggraheni et al., 2026; Esa et al., 2023), which demonstrate how children's songs are increasingly used as narrative devices in Indonesian horror media. When situated within unsettling cinematic environments, these songs undergo a profound symbolic transformation, shifting from markers of innocence to sources of dread and the uncanny. Nevertheless, scholarly attention to this phenomenon has remained relatively limited, particularly with regard to how such songs operate at the level of signification to generate meaning, evoke fear, and articulate broader cultural anxieties within Indonesian horror cinema.

This study investigates the recontextualization of children's songs in Indonesian horror films through the lens of cultural semiotics. Drawing on Roland Barthes' (1964) theory of first-order (denotative) and second-order (connotative and mythic) signification, this study analyzes how children's songs are transformed from symbols of innocence into carriers of supernatural and ideological meanings. By focusing on selected Indonesian horror films, this study contributes to broader discussions in cultural and film studies concerning the relationship between sound, fear, and cultural memory. This study addresses two main issues: how children's songs are recontextualized within Indonesian horror cinema and how these songs function as semiotic resources in constructing fear, meaning, and cultural narratives.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Barthes' Semiotics and Cultural Transformation

Barthes' (1964) semiotic framework offers a compelling lens through which to examine the transformation of children's songs in Indonesian horror cinema. Within this perspective, signs, whether visual, auditory, or textual, are understood as inherently meaningful, carrying layers of cultural and ideological significance that shape perception and interpretation. The distinction between first-order (denotative) and second-order (connotative and mythic) signification is particularly pertinent for analyzing how children's songs, conventionally associated with innocence and play, acquire more complex and unsettling meanings when situated within the aesthetic and narrative structures of the horror genre (Uso Domenech et al., 2024). Sinaga (2022) stated that Indonesian children's songs, such as *Gilang Sipaku Gelang*, function as straightforward cultural expressions associated with childhood play, simplicity, and emotional security. The meanings at the level of first-order signification operate at the level of denotation, where the song is understood primarily through its literal form and socially accepted function. However, Riaz et al. (2024) showed that denotation represents only the surface layer of meaning. The second-order level of signification, often described as myth, reveals how signs are recontextualized within broader cultural and ideological frameworks to create new meanings. Research by Rahmalina et al. (2025) and Abidin et al. (2025) stated that children's songs are re-coded at this second-order level to evoke fear, anxiety, and supernatural presence in Indonesian horror films.

Through narrative placement, sound design, and visual framing, these familiar melodies are associated with cultural myths, spectral forces, and deeply rooted societal anxieties. In films such as *Tulah*, *Oo Nina Bobo*, *Danur: I Can the Ghost*, and *Danur 3,* children's songs are stripped of their associations with innocence and instead signify haunting, death, and malevolent power. What was once a benign cultural artifact has been transformed into a charged semiotic sign that operates within the logic of horror.

Research by Gu (2024) and Watve (2026) underscored that horror films, particularly in non-Western contexts, frequently draw on culturally specific symbols and soundscapes to generate fear and emotional intensity. In Indonesian horror cinema, the deployment of traditional cultural signs through imagery, music, and sound reflects a collective cultural consciousness shaped by local beliefs, folklore, and superstition (Marwantika, 2021). Music plays a central role in this process by establishing an affective bond with the audience and guiding their emotional responses throughout the film's unsettling atmosphere (Tompkins, 2014). By foregrounding the semiotic transformation of children's songs, this study demonstrates how Indonesian filmmakers strategically mobilize familiar cultural symbols to construct terror that resonates both culturally and emotionally with audiences.

2.2. The Cultural Context of Indonesian Horror

Indonesian horror films frequently integrate local beliefs, rituals, and mythological traditions, reflecting the country's complex and enduring relationship with the supernatural (Heeren, 2013). This relationship is deeply rooted in Indonesia's cultural plurality, where diverse ethnic traditions, spiritual practices, and belief systems continue to shape everyday social life (Purnama, 2023). Concepts such as superstition, spirit possession, ancestral influence, and unseen forces governing human fate recur prominently in Indonesian folklore and are consistently articulated within cinematic narratives (Prasetyo et al., 2025). Leong (2023) and Kurniawan and Santabudi's (2023) studies demonstrated that Indonesian horror cinema not only reproduced these cultural elements but also reinterpreted them in response to contemporary social anxieties and changing audience expectations.

Children's songs occupy a particularly significant symbolic position in this cultural framework. As integral components of Indonesian cultural memory, these songs are closely associated with innocence, emotional intimacy, and a sense of protection, often transmitted through intergenerational practices (Lita et al., 2024; Puspitaningrum, 2022). Their familiarity and affective resonance render them especially powerful when they are repositioned within unsettling cinematic contexts. Stevenson's (2022) research on sound and music in horror films indicates that the use of familiar auditory material in unfamiliar or disturbing settings can intensify psychological unease by disrupting audience expectations. The recontextualization of Indonesian children's songs within horror narratives produces a striking contrast between cultural innocence and narrative terror, generating affective dissonance that amplifies fear. Such transformations illustrate how culturally embedded sonic elements can be strategically re-signified to produce new layers of meaning, reinforcing the emotional and symbolic depth of Indonesian horror cinema (Praratya, 2024; Priyatna, 2024).

2.3. The Role of Sound and Music in Horror

In horror cinema, music functions as more than just a background accompaniment. It operates as a crucial narrative and affective device (Stefanini & Matamala, 2023). Chion (1994) emphasized that sound in film serves both as an emotional cue and a cultural signal, guiding audience perception and shaping narrative meaning. London (2023) underscored that sound design and musical elements are instrumental in constructing atmosphere, signaling danger, and sustaining psychological tension, especially in the horror genre. Meanwhile, the use of children's songs in horror films is particularly effective because of their deep cultural resonance (Gu, 2024). In traditional Indonesian culture, these songs are closely associated with innocence, familial affection, and emotional security. However, when deployed within horror narratives, they embody the corruption of innocence, a theme central to many horror traditions. This transformation enables the subversion of familiar cultural symbols, compelling audiences to reassess sounds and melodies that were once sources of comfort and trust (Noor, 2025).

In this study, children's songs in horror movies function as cultural markers that reflect and distort the intersection of tradition and modernity. They articulate a social landscape in which long-standing beliefs, such as spirits, curses, and ancestral rituals, collide with contemporary realities shaped by urbanization, modernization, and changing family structures. Once benign and familiar, these songs have become vehicles for expressing cultural tension, carrying the weight of inherited tradition while simultaneously exposing the anxieties and fears that permeate contemporary Indonesian society.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative, interpretive research design grounded in cultural semiotics to examine the transformation of children's songs in Indonesian horror cinema. Drawing on Roland Barthes' (1964) distinction between first-order (denotative) and second-order (connotative and mythic) signification, the analysis explored how children's songs were re-signified when repositioned within horror narratives, shifting from associations of innocence to meanings related to fear, myth, and the supernatural. This framework enables a systematic interpretation of culturally embedded sounds as meaningful semiotic resources within cinematic discourse.

3.2. Materials

The dataset consisted of four Indonesian horror films: *Danur: I Can See the Ghost* (2017), *Danur 3: Sunyaruri* (2019), *Oo Nina Bobo* (2014), and *Tulah* (2023) (Table 1). These films were selected using purposive sampling based on three criteria: (1) the presence of children's songs within the film, either as part of the narrative or sound design; (2) the functional role of these songs in shaping the atmosphere, character development, or plot progression; and (3) variation in production years to allow comparative analysis across different temporal contexts. The selected films represent cases in which children's songs were not merely incidental but contributed meaningfully to the construction of mood and narrative tension. The time span (2014–2023) allowed for the identification of recurring patterns and variations in the cinematic treatment of culturally familiar songs. The unit of analysis consisted of specific scenes in which children's songs were audibly present and narratively relevant to the film.

Table 1
Film Information

Film Poster	Film Information
 **Picture 1** *Danur Film Poster*	Director: Awi Suryadi Release date: March 30, 2017 (Indonesia) Production companies • Pichouse Films • MD Pictures Duration: 1h 14m Genres • Horror • Mystery • Thriller I Can See Ghosts is an Indonesian supernatural horror film released on March 30, 2017, directed by Awi Suryadi. The film is based on the book *Gerbang Dialog Danur* by Risa Saraswati, which was written based on her own experiences as an indigo child. The film stars Prilly Latuconsina, Sandrinna Michelle, Shareefa Daanish, Indra Brotolaras, and Kinaryosih. Source: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt6496236/mediaviewer/rm3741201152/?ref_=tt_ov_i



Picture 2
Danur 3 Film Poster

Director: Awi Suryadi
Release date: September 26, 2019 (Indonesia)
Production companies

- MD Pictures
- Pichouse Films

Duration: 1h 30m
Genre: Horror

After years of being friendly with her little ghosts, Risa (Prilly Latuconsina) begins to feel that she must have a normal life like other women. Especially in that film, Risa has a boyfriend named Dimas (Rizky Nazar), a radio announcer. Risa does not tell Dimas about her ability to see ghosts, and that she has five little friends who are not human. Risa's friendship with Peter cs is shaken after she feels Peter cs begins teasing Dimas. Risa finally chose to close her inner eyes so she could live a normal life. But a strange thing happens. He could no longer see Peter cs, but again smelled danur (liquid that comes out of decayed corpses). It is an evil ghost who enters the house through heavy rain; the ghost of an evil woman who not only threatens her life, but also Peter cs.

Source:
https://www.imdb.com/title/tt10698468/mediaviewer/rm459846145/?ref_=tt_ov_i



Picture 3
Oo Nina Bobo Film Poster

Director: Jose Poernomo
Release date: March 20, 2014 (Indonesia)
Production company: Rapi Films
Duration: 91 m
Genres

- Horror
- Mystery
- Thriller

This film is based on the story of the song Nina Bobo, a lullaby often sung by parents to their children. Five years ago, a mysterious massacre occurred. A mother was found hanging, her husband died after falling down the stairs, and their youngest daughter, Lala, who was only six years old, was found dead in her room. The only survivor of the incident was their seven-year-old son, Ryan (Firman Ferdiansyah). Since then, Ryan has suffered from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and has been in care. His emotional state is unstable, and he frequently experiences nightmares. Gradually, Ryan withdrew into himself and fixated on the trauma he had experienced, behaving as though he had forgotten everything that had happened.

Source:
https://www.imdb.com/title/tt3652924/mediaviewer/rm4025422592/?ref_=tt_ov_i



Picture 4
Tulah Film Poster

Director: Chiska Doppert
Release date: March 30, 2023 (Indonesia)
Production company: HERS Productions
Duration: 1h 25m (85 min)
Genres

- Horror
- Thriller

Gilang has decided to go on a vacation with two of his best friends, Sarah and Kevin, to celebrate his birthday. The plan gets disrupted by the presence of a couple of uninvited guests. The atmosphere gets ominous as they drive into a forest, and they see the appearance of a mysterious grandfather figure and a scary little girl. Unexpected terrors befall them, which forces Gilang to separate from his friends and also drives him to remember a cursed past of his.

Source:
https://www.imdb.com/title/tt20881616/mediaviewer/rm946614529/?ref_=tt_ov_i

3.3. Procedure

3.3.1. Data Collection

Data were collected through systematic viewing of each film. Initial viewings were conducted to gain an overall understanding of the narrative structure and audiovisual composition. Subsequent viewings focused on identifying and isolating scenes in which children's songs were prominent. All relevant scenes were cataloged, and the accompanying song lyrics were documented. Where necessary, the lyrics were transcribed and translated into English to ensure clarity and consistency in the analysis. Additional contextual information, including scene setting, character involvement, and narrative function, was recorded to support the detailed interpretation. Data collection continued until no new patterns were observed in the selected films.

3.3.2. Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using a structured, multistage procedure grounded in Barthes' (1964) semiotic model. First, selected scenes were examined to identify the conventional or commonly recognized meanings associated with children's songs within cultural and everyday contexts. This corresponded to the level of denotation, identifying each song's conventional cultural meaning based on its traditional use in Indonesian society. Second, attention was paid to how these songs were presented cinematically, including aspects such as sound intensity, timing, repetition, visual framing, and interaction with other audiovisual elements. Third, the analysis explored how the meaning of the songs shifts within the horror context, particularly in relation to the construction of tension, fear, and narrative ambiguity. This stage involved examining how the juxtaposition between familiar sounds and unsettling imagery contributes to altered audience perception, identifying connotative and mythic meanings produced through audiovisual elements. Finally, the findings across all scenes and films were compared to identify recurring patterns and variations in the use of children's songs. This comparative approach enabled the identification of shifts in signification from everyday cultural expression to culturally embedded symbols of fear. To ensure analytical rigor, the same coding and interpretive procedures were consistently applied across all data. Interpretations were supported by detailed scene descriptions, allowing transparency in how conclusions were derived.

Several strategies were employed to enhance the study's trustworthiness, guided by the qualitative framework proposed by Yvonna et al. (1985). Credibility was strengthened through prolonged engagement with the data, which was achieved by repeated viewing and detailed scene analysis. Reflexive awareness was maintained throughout the research process to account for the researcher's interpretation. Dependability was addressed by applying consistent analytical procedures across all films to ensure that the interpretations were not arbitrary. Confirmability was supported by grounding the interpretations in observable audiovisual elements rather than subjective impressions alone. Finally, a thick description of scenes, songs, and narrative contexts was provided to facilitate transferability, enabling readers to assess the relevance of the findings to other cinematic or cultural contexts.

4. Results

This study presents descriptive findings on the use of children's songs in the four Indonesian horror films, *Danur: I Can See the Ghost* (2017), *Danur 3* (2019), *Oo Nina Bobo* (2014), and *Tulah* (2023), through the semiotic framework proposed by Roland Barthes (1964). The findings focus on several analytical categories and are summarized in Table 2. These categories include: (A) film title and year of release, situating each case within its cinematic and historical context; (B) song title, identifying the specific children's song employed; (C) original denotative context, outlining the cultural and emotional meanings associated with the song before its cinematic transformation; (D) transformed connotative meaning, describing how the song's significance shifts within the horror film toward fear, threat, or supernatural power; (E) symbolic connections grounded in Barthes' (1964) concept of mythology, analyzing how the song is sacralized and endowed with new layers of meaning; and (F) cinematic transformation, assessing how this transformation reshapes audience perception and resonates with broader societal anxieties.

Table 2
Descriptive Findings on the Use of Children's Songs in the Four Indonesian Horror Films

No	Film Title	Song Title	Original Context (Pre-Film) Denotative	Transformed Context (In-Film) Connotative	Symbolic Connections (Barthes' Mythology)	Cinematic Transformation
1	*Danur I can see the ghost* (2017)	*Boneka Abdi*	Associated with childhood playfulness, nostalgia, and emotional joy.	Recontextualized as a haunting chant used to summon child spirits.	In the film, the song is repeated three times, each time accompanied by the appearance of a child ghost. The vocals are slow and sung in a whispered, breathy tone.	Produces emotional dissonance by corrupting childhood symbols, reflecting cultural fears about the violation of innocence.
2	*Danur 3* (2019)	*Hujan Pergilah*	Expresses cheerfulness, anticipation, and children's desire to play outdoors.	Transformed into a supernatural invocation associated with ghostly appearances.	The song is portrayed as a sacred symbol of the unseen world through its performative expression, emotional delivery, and cinematic framing, which together create an atmosphere of mystery, spiritual presence, and supernatural tension within the narrative.	Although familiarity with the song may vary, its cinematic use significantly reshapes audience interpretation and emotional response.
3	*Oo Nina Bobo* (2014)	*Nina Bobo*	Lullaby is associated with maternal care, protection, and emotional security.	Re-signified as a marker of haunting and supernatural danger.	Through its repeated association with tragic events and supernatural occurrences, the song gradually becomes sacralized within the narrative, transforming into a mythic sign that symbolizes impending danger, fear, and the presence of an unseen threat.	Generates fear and discomfort, particularly among children, disrupting familial and domestic associations of safety.
4	*Tulah* (2023)	*Gilang sipaku gilang*	Conveys joy and enthusiasm related to returning home.	Reframed as a call toward death and supernatural fate.	The song is mythologized as a sacred conduit to death, intensified through tonal delivery and visual symbolism.	The lyrics acquire connotations of mortality, reinforcing collective anxieties through audiovisual alignment with death.

Table 2 provides an analysis that demonstrates the sacralization of children's songs operates as a recurring semiotic strategy in Indonesian horror films. By converting songs traditionally associated with innocence into symbols of terror, filmmakers destabilize the boundary between the familiar and frightening. This destabilization intensifies the emotional impact precisely because it disrupts deeply ingrained cultural expectations. The songs no longer function as neutral cultural expressions but as mythic signs that articulate collective fears of death, the supernatural, and the vulnerability of childhood.

4.1. The Description of Sacralization and Symbolic Shifts

Across the films examined, children's songs, traditionally associated with innocence, joy, emotional security, and maternal care, undergo a profound symbolic transformation through the cinematic techniques and narrative framing characteristic of the horror genre (Petronio, 2022). This section presents descriptive findings on the use of children's songs in four Indonesian horror films. The analysis focuses on how the songs are presented in terms of timing, vocal delivery, repetition, visual context, and musical arrangement, along with their original lyrics, English translations, and conventional meanings, before their cinematic use.

4.1.1. Danur: I Can See the Ghost (2017)

The Sundanese children's song Boneka Abdi appears several times throughout the film. The first emerges at the beginning of the film, then at approximately 00:02:15, 00:18:40, and 00:42:10. The song is performed using a child's voice characterized by a slow tempo, lowered pitch, and breathy tone. In most instances, the voice is heard off-screen before the appearance of ghostly child figures. Mostly, the melody is presented without instrumental accompaniment, creating a sparse auditory environment. The song is repeated multiple times, often immediately preceding or accompanying scenes involving supernatural presence.

Datum 1 *Boneka Abdi* Lyrics

Abdi teh ayeuna gaduh hiji boneka. Teu kinten saena sareng lucuna
Ku abdi di erokan, erokna sae pisan. Cing mangga tingali boneka abdi.

English Translation (My Doll)

I now have an unbelievably cute doll. I put a skirt on her, and it looked very lovely. Please play with my dolls.

The denotative meaning of this song is about a child who wants to show her/his friends that she/he has a lovely and cute doll. They put a beautiful skirt on the doll and asked the children to see it.

4.1.2. Danur 3 (2019)

The song *Hujan Pergilah* appears in several scenes, first from approximately 00:37:59 to 00:39:25. The vocal delivery is softer and slower than in typical renditions, with a subdued, almost whispered tone. The song is repeated at key narrative moments, particularly during scenes involving children or supernatural disturbances. Visually, the song is situated in dark environments, both indoors and outdoors, often in settings associated with isolation or tension. The musical arrangement is minimal, with little to no instrumental accompaniment, allowing the vocal line to remain prominent.

Datum *2 Hujan Pergilah Lyrics*

Hujan pergilah
Datanglah lain hari kami ingin bermain hujan pergilah

English Translation

Rain rain go away
Come again another day, we want to play. Rain rain go away.

In its original context, the song expresses a playful desire for rain to stop so children can continue outdoor activities, typically associated with lighthearted and cheerful situations.

4.1.3. Oo Nina Bobo

In Oo Nina Bobo (2014), the lullaby Nina Bobo is presented multiple times throughout the film, appearing at approximately 00:00:30, 00:02:11, 00:03:20, 01:00:58, and 01:25:00. The vocal delivery is slow and soft, with a slightly strained tone, and in some instances includes an echo effect or is layered with ambient sound. The song is repeated across several scenes, frequently occurring before or during moments depicting psychological distress or supernatural events. Visually, the song is associated with domestic spaces such as bedrooms and dimly lit interiors, often during nighttime scenes. The musical arrangement varies between unaccompanied vocal delivery and faint background sound.

Datum 3 *Nina Bobo* Lyrics

Nina bobo, oh nina bobo
Kalau tidak bobo, digigit nyamuk
Nina bobo, oh nina bobo
Kalau tidak bobo, digigit nyamuk
Nina bobo, oh nina bobo
Hari sudah malam terkabut intan
Nina bobo, oh nina bobo
Bulan kan menjagamu, tidurlah sayang
Kalau tidak bobo, mimpi tak datang
Tidurlah agar pagi cepat menjelang
Tidurlah agar pagi cepat menjelang

English Translation Sleep, My Child

Sleep my child, Sleep my child
If you don’t sleep, you’ll get bitten by mosquitoes
Sleep my child, Sleep my child
If you don’t sleep, you’ll get bitten by mosquitoes
Sleep my child, Sleep my child
It is already night, covered in diamond fog
Sleep my child, Sleep my child
The moon will take care of you, sleep baby
If you don’t sleep, dreams won’t come
Sleep so that the morning comes quickly
Sleep so that the morning comes quickly

In its conventional use, the song functions as a lullaby associated with maternal care, emotional comfort, and protection.

4.1.4. Tulah

Tulah, the film, illustrated the transformation through the integration of folkloric elements and culturally embedded sounds. The incorporation of *Gilang Sipaku Gelang*, a song associated with communal play and togetherness, reinforces the film’s grounding in collective cultural memory. However, its recontextualization within scenes of curses and misfortunes shifted its meaning toward an auditory sign of impending danger. This transformation resonated with broader cultural orientations toward uncertainties and the unseen. In contexts where supernatural causality and ancestral influence remained culturally salient, the reinterpretation of familiar sounds as warnings or omens aligned with existing frameworks of meaning, thereby amplifying their narrative and emotional effects.

Datum 4 *Gilang Sipaku Gelang* Lyrics

Gilang Sipaku Gelang, Gelang si rama-ramai
Mari pulang, Marilah pulang
Marilah pulang, Bersama-sama.

English Translation

Gilang Sipaku Gelang, Gelang si rama-ramai
Let's go home, let's go home
Let's go home together

Denotatively, the song refers to a familiar children's melody associated with play and social bonding. However, within the horror context, the melody is re-signified as a warning signal. Its repetition transforms childhood familiarity into an index of doom, suggesting that the curse has entered the protagonist's everyday space.

At the level of encoding and decoding, Indonesian horror filmmakers embed multiple layers of meaning into children's songs, which audiences interpret through culturally informed frameworks and lived experiences. Under ordinary conditions, these songs signify safety, innocence, and emotional reassurance. Within horror narratives, however, they are systematically reconfigured to signify fear, vulnerability, and the breakdown of protective structures. This reversal proves particularly effective in cultural contexts where shared values and collective memory strongly shape emotional interpretation.

These transformations illustrate how culturally familiar sounds can be re-signified into symbols of fear through cinematic mediation. The tension between familiarity and distortion becomes central to the horror effect, as it activates collective memory while simultaneously undermining it. In this way, the reconfiguration of children's songs not only intensifies emotional response but also reflects broader cultural dynamics in which meanings are negotiated between tradition, belief, and contemporary narrative forms.

4.2. Cultural Semiotics and the Horror Genre

Indonesian horror cinema frequently explores the supernatural through recurring motifs such as spells to call the ghosts, curses, and posthumous revenge. Within these narratives, children's songs do not function merely as incidental background sound; rather, they operate as semiotic cues that signal the presence of malevolent forces and impending disruption.

In *Danur: I Can See the Ghost*, the children's song *Boneka Abdi* (My Doll) is recontextualized through its association with a song that is used to summon Risa's little ghost friends. She sings *Abdi teh ayeuna gaduh hiji boneka. Teu kinten saena sareng lucuna. Ku abdi di erokan, erokna sae pisan. Cing mangga tingali boneka abdi* [I have a doll now. It's really cute and funny. I've been playing with it, and it's really good. Please look at my doll]. Denotatively, the song evokes playfulness and innocence; however, in this context, it becomes a signifier of ghosts' caller. The combination of auditory familiarity and visual disturbance produces a strong uncanny effect.

A comparable transformation is found in *Danur 3: Sunyaruri*, where *Hujan Pergilah* (Rain go away) is used to construct fear through the distortion of a playful children's melody: *Hujan pergilah datanglah lain hari kami ingin bermain hujan pergilah* [Rain go away, come another day we want to play rain go away]. In scenes involving rain, darkness, and the caller signaling to meet the ghosts, the song is delivered in a slow and eerie manner. This song is used by Risa to call her little ghost friends because she has a big problem and needs their help. Risa sang this song to awaken the memory of their togetherness. As a result, the song becomes a semiotic bridge between childhood innocence and supernatural anxiety.

In *Tulah*, the children's song *Gilang Sipaku Gelang* is re-signified as an auditory marker of the curse that haunts the protagonist. In several scenes associated with moments of tension and supernatural disturbance, the melody appears prior to or alongside the emergence of threat, creating a sense of anticipation. The lyrics are *Mari pulang, Marilah pulang, Marilah pulang, Bersama-sama* [Let's go home, Let's go home, Let's go home, together]. Denotatively, the song is associated with childhood play and communal joy. However, within the horror context, its repetition transforms it into a sign of doom, marking the intrusion of uncontrollable and dangerous forces into everyday life. The spirit of a little child, with a terrifying gaze, wants the man who hit her to die and take him to hell together.

A similar semiotic mechanism is evident in *Oo Nina Bobo*, where the lullaby *Nina Bobo* (Sleep, my child) shifts from a symbol of comfort and maternal care into a chilling, ghostly refrain. In scenes characterized by darkness, isolation, or the presence of unseen entities: *Nina bobo, oh nina bobo. Kalau tidak bobo, digigit nyamuk* [Lullaby, oh lullaby. If you don't sleep, you'll get bitten by mosquitoes]. The song is presented in a slowed or altered tone, intensifying its unsettling effect. The juxtaposition of the song's familiar soothing qualities with haunting visual imagery generates tension between safety and threat. The lullaby no longer functions as protection; instead, it becomes a sign of haunting presence.

Across these films, children's songs undergo a similar process of re-signification. In *Tulah,* the song functions as a marker of a curse; in *Oo Nina Bobo,* as a ghostly lullaby; and in *Danur* 1 and *Danur* 3, as a ghost-calling song. These examples demonstrate that children's songs are not merely background elements, but culturally charged signs that transform familiarity, comfort, and nostalgia into fear. From a cultural semiotics perspective, this study demonstrates that children's songs function as signifiers within a shared cultural code, one deeply embedded in collective memory. In Indonesian horror films, these songs are reconstituted as signified objects that carry layered meanings, simultaneously invoking comfort, vulnerability, and terror. The concept of mythology, the process of sacralization, becomes particularly evident. Songs that symbolize joy, protection, or emotional security are elevated into sacred signs within the horror genre, endowed with supernatural authority and mythic power. This second-order signification transforms culturally familiar sounds into vessels of horror, articulating deeper societal anxieties surrounding innocence, safety, and maternal protection. In this context, children's songs are no longer neutral or purely nostalgic artifacts; they become culturally charged signs that articulate broader concerns regarding innocence, protection, and existential threat.

The sacralization of children's songs reflects an ongoing cultural negotiation between tradition and modernity. Rooted in longstanding practices and local belief systems, these songs are rearticulated within contemporary horror aesthetics shaped by modern cinematic techniques and evolving audience sensibilities. This interaction illustrates how inherited cultural forms are not displaced but reconfigured, allowing horror cinema to function as a site where cultural continuity and transformation intersect. Through the re-signification of children's songs, Indonesian horror films construct a culturally specific form of fear, one that emerges not from the unfamiliar but from the unsettling transformation of what is most intimate, trusted, and socially embedded.

5. Discussion

The findings demonstrate that children's songs in Indonesian films undergo a significant shift in function when repositioned within horror narratives. Songs traditionally associated with childhood, comfort, playfulness, and emotional security are presented alongside scenes involving ghosts, darkness, isolation, and supernatural disturbances. Through changes in vocal delivery, repetition, slowed tempo, reduced instrumental accompaniment, and alignment with unsettling visual context, these songs acquire new meanings within the cinematic environment. This transformation can be understood through Roland Barthes' (1964) concept of second-order signification. At the denotative level, songs such as *Boneka Abdi, Hujan Pergilah, Nina Bobo,* and *Gilang Sipaku Gelang* retain their conventional association with childhood activities, caregiving, and communal interaction. However, when these songs are repeatedly connected with supernatural figures, psychological tension, and threatening situations, they become re-signified within the horror context. The familiar auditory forms no longer function solely as children's songs but also operate as cinematic markers associated with fear, haunting, and supernatural presence.

The results also show how repetition contributes to the construction of horror meaning. In all four films, the songs recur during scenes involving tension or supernatural appearances. This repetition gradually strengthens the association between the melody and disturbing visual events. Previous studies on horror sound design have similarly emphasized that recurring sound motifs contribute to emotional anticipation and psychological unease by conditioning audience expectations (Krysanova, 2023; Teng & Hisham, 2023). In the films analyzed, repeated melodies function as recognizable auditory signs that prepare viewers for narrative disruption or supernatural emergence. Vocal delivery also plays an

important role in this transformation. The songs are frequently performed using a slowed tempo, soft vocal intensity, breathy tones, echo effect, and minimal accompaniment. These modifications alter the conventional presentation of children's songs and create contrast between familiar lyrics and unsettling audiovisual environments. Chion (1994) and London (2023) argue that sound in cinema functions not only as background accompaniment but also as an affective and narrative device shaping audience perception. The findings support this perspective by showing how vocal manipulation contributes to the emotional atmosphere of Indonesian horror films.

The recontextualization of children's songs further reflects broader cultural processes related to collective memory and familiarity. In Indonesian society, children's songs are commonly transmitted through family interaction, caregiving practices, and early childhood experiences. Their familiarity allows filmmakers to draw upon sounds that are already emotionally recognizable to audiences. As a result, the horror effect emerges not from unfamiliar sounds, but from the alteration of culturally intimate auditory material. This observation aligns with Hall's (1980) encoding-decoding framework, in which audiences interpret media text through culturally shared knowledge and lived experience. These dynamics can also be examined through Hofstede's (1980, 2001) cultural dimensions framework. The collectivist orientation is commonly associated with Indonesian society. The collectivist orientation commonly associated with Indonesian society reinforces the shared emotional associations attached to children's songs because these songs are socially transmitted across generations. Consequently, their reinterpretation within horror narratives affects not only individual memory but also childhood, family, and emotional protection. The dimensions of uncertainty avoidance also help explain the effectiveness of these songs within horror narratives. Familiar melodies presented within ambiguous or threatening situations contribute to feelings of tension and unpredictability. In films such as *Oo Nina Bobo* and *Danur 3*, the repeated use of children's songs before supernatural events intensifies anticipation and anxiety because familiar auditory cues become associated with uncertain outcomes. Meanwhile, the dimension of long-term orientation reflects how traditional cultural elements continue to persist within contemporary media forms.

Overall, the study highlighted how horror movies mobilized culturally familiar sounds to construct fear, demonstrating that horror emerged from the transformation of intimate cultural elements. The transformation of these songs demonstrates how familiar cultural material can be recontextualized within horror cinema to produce new layers of meaning while maintaining connections to collective cultural memory. Through repetition, altered vocal delivery, and cinematic placement, children's songs become significant components in the representation of horror, memory, and supernatural experience in contemporary Indonesian films. This study is limited by the availability of Indonesian horror films that prominently feature children's songs as central narrative or symbolic elements. Accordingly, the analysis focuses on a selective corpus of contemporary films, which may not capture earlier or less accessible productions within the genre. Furthermore, as a qualitative cultural semiotic analysis, the findings are interpretive and culturally situated; meanings attributed to children's songs may vary across audiences and cultural contexts. Therefore, the results should be understood as context-specific rather than universally generalizable.

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Data Availability

The datasets generated during and/or analyzed during the current study are included in this published article.

Ethics Declaration

This study does not involve human participants or animal subjects. The research focuses on the semiotic analysis of films and audiovisual media; therefore, ethical approval was not required.

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