

THE AESTHETICS OF VISUAL ART IN P. RAMLEE'S WORK: *URAT DAWAI TULANG BESI*

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Abstract

This study examines the aesthetic elements of visual art in P. Ramlee's works. The approach not only recognizes the artistic significance of the nation's cinematic heritage but also underscores its relevance in inspiring innovative expressions in contemporary visual art. Adopting a qualitative methodology, the study centers on visual analysis grounded in semiotics and iconography, with close observation of symbols and aesthetic structures in selected scenes. To support the analysis, interviews were conducted with art experts and film researchers. The findings reveal that semiotic and iconographic elements can be creatively adapted into sculptural works, enriching their aesthetic value and contributing to new narratives in sustainable art. Moreover, cultural symbolism and colour composition in P. Ramlee's works were effectively integrated into the sculptures, enhancing their aesthetic quality and strengthening the visual messaging of the artworks.

Keywords – Aesthetics, P. Ramlee, Semiotics, Iconography

Introduction

P. Ramlee was a prolific and highly talented legendary artist. His involvement as a director, scriptwriter, lyricist, composer, actor, comedian, and singer in Malaysia was closely tied to the development of local cinema, in which he played an active role. Research on P. Ramlee is highly meaningful as it expands the body of knowledge on one of the nation's most prominent cultural icons. The importance of continuously studying this figure lies in his ability to inspire the future development of a more vibrant artistic landscape. However, it is not an easy task to gather extensive information about this legendary figure, much of which is connected to his career at Jalan Ampas Studio in Singapore.

P. Ramlee's real name was Teuku Zakaria bin Teuku Nyak Puteh. He was born on 22 March 1929 at Jalan Rawang (Counter Hall), Penang. During

his schooling years, he received education in Malay, Arabic, English, and Japanese, but he showed a stronger inclination towards music. This was evident as, by the age of thirteen, he had already begun to learn music, with the violin as the first instrument he mastered.

The music groups that became his earliest platforms in the performing arts, particularly singing, were Bintang Sore and *Teruna Sekampung*. As a teenager, he also served as a muezzin at the mosque, while in his spare time he devoted himself to music and singing. His melodious voice, capable of captivating and influencing the public, began to attract attention during his youth. What started as a leisure activity eventually blossomed into a remarkable artistic talent.

His performance at the Agricultural Fair in Bukit Mertajam, where he sang his first composition, *Azizah*, marked the

turning point of his career in the arts. That moment became the stepping stone for him to explore the national entertainment scene. Following this event, film director B. S. Rajhans invited him to become a background singer in films. In August 1948, he moved to Singapore to further develop his artistic career. His natural talent and versatility enabled him to excel across multiple artistic fields with great success.

According to Johan Jaafar (1995), P. Ramlee was a unique artist because of his principles and character. This view was supported by Aziz Sattar, one of his closest friends. During the Forum on P. Ramlee's Lyrics at the University of Malaya on 26 May 1998, Aziz Sattar explained that P. Ramlee was always willing to help others to the best of his ability, even when he himself was in difficulty or when the help required was beyond his means.

This legendary artist was a cinematic figure who became a symbol of excellence in Malaysian and international filmmaking. To this day, no successor has matched his stature. The uniqueness and aesthetic brilliance of his silver screen works in the 1950s and 1960s reflected the genius of Malay thought, expressed through his acting, singing, comedy, and music. He successfully introduced innovation and a fresh perspective into Malay films, captivating audiences across all social strata.

P. Ramlee encouraged society to think critically and reflect upon themselves, striving to improve weaknesses in order to build a greater nation. His films were a manifestation of his aspirations to uplift the nation and its people. He voiced the sentiments of the common people in a subtle yet profound manner, while simultaneously envisioning the

nation's future through the ideas embedded in his works. The visual art elements in P. Ramlee's films reflect the richness of Malay culture, the refinement of captivating cinematography, and the depth of symbolism that embody his artistic genius in representing society and life. From an aesthetic perspective, his works not only display visual beauty through the arrangement of *mise-en-scène*, lighting, costumes, and settings, but also elevate the spirit and soul of cultural identity, beautifully translated onto the silver screen. In the context of the modern era, which increasingly emphasizes the sustainability of art and the preservation of cultural heritage, the effort to re-examine and reconnect P. Ramlee's visual aesthetics with contemporary discourse becomes highly relevant. The metaphor "urat dawai, tulang besi" (veins of wire, bones of steel), inspired by a scene in one of P. Ramlee's films, can be interpreted as a form of aesthetic integrity that is not only narrative in nature but also represents the strength of an artistic philosophy deeply rooted in the life of the Malay community. Therefore, this study focuses on how the visual art elements in P. Ramlee's films can be analyzed, interpreted, and re-applied from an aesthetic perspective, thereby highlighting the continuity between cultural heritage, visual expression, and cinematic beauty in artistic works.

P. Ramlee holds profound significance as both a cultural product and a socio-historical document. Similar to other forms of cultural creation such as novels, poetry, music, theatre, and various other written records, P. Ramlee's screenplays also function as a medium that captures and articulates the intellectual spirit of his era as well as the socio-historical circumstances that inspired them. Based on this assumption, visual art can be

understood as an expressive form shaped by its socio-historical context. Within this framework, aesthetics are not merely concerned with beauty alone but exist as a unique unity with the society that sustains and engages with them.

This study is significant as it highlights the aesthetic values of visual art in P. Ramlee's films, which not only represent the richness of Malay cultural heritage but also reveal the refinement of cinematic expression during the golden era of Malay cinema. By examining the visual aesthetics in his works, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how elements such as *mise-en-scène*, cinematography, symbolism, and cultural representation were employed to construct meaning and narrative in Malay films.

Method

This study employs a qualitative research design, specifically through content analysis, to examine the visual aesthetics in P. Ramlee's films. The qualitative approach is deemed appropriate as film, as a cultural artifact, embodies layers of meaning that extend beyond mere entertainment, encompassing symbolism, cultural identity, and socio-historical contexts.

The primary sources of this study consist of selected film excerpts directed and performed by P. Ramlee, with particular focus on visual elements such as *urat dawai*, *tulang besi*. The secondary sources include books, journal articles, archival records, and critical writings related to P. Ramlee, Malay cinema, and visual aesthetics. These sources serve as theoretical and contextual support in the process of film interpretation.

In an effort to understand the aesthetics of visual art in P. Ramlee's films, this

study employs two main theoretical frameworks, namely semiotics and iconography. Semiotic theory, developed by Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce, focuses on the analysis of signs and the relationship between the signifier and the signified. Through this framework, the study examines how imagery, symbols, costumes, character movements, and *mise-en-scène* function as mediums of visual communication that convey meaning to audiences. In addition, the theory of iconography, pioneered by Aby Warburg and systematized by Erwin Panofsky in *Studies in Iconology* (1939), provides a method of interpreting visual images through three levels of analysis: pre-iconographic description, iconographic analysis, and iconological interpretation. This framework allows the study to uncover not only the formal and thematic aspects of P. Ramlee's films but also the deeper cultural, historical, and philosophical meanings embedded within their visual aesthetics.

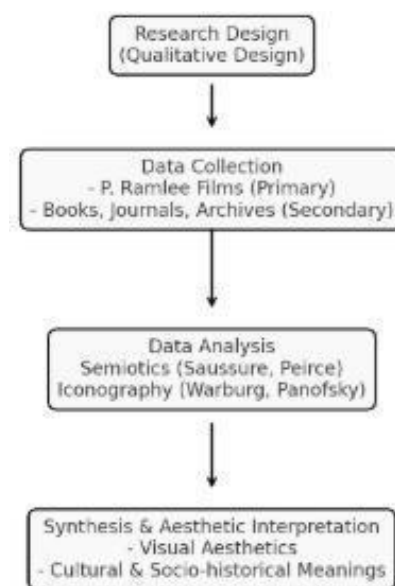


Figure 1. Research Methodology Framework on the Visual Aesthetics in P. Ramlee's Films

By integrating semiotics and iconography, this methodological framework provides a comprehensive lens for examining the visual aesthetics in P. Ramlee's films. Semiotics elucidates the mechanisms through which meaning is produced by signs, while iconography situates these signs within broader cultural and historical narratives. This combination enables the study to uncover P. Ramlee's films not only as artistic expressions but also as socio-historical documents that reflect Malay identity, cultural values, and aesthetic thought.

Finding and Discussion

The findings of this study, examined through the lens of semiotic theory, reveal that the visual aesthetics in P. Ramlee's films function as a system of signs that not only communicate meaning on the surface level but also uncover deeper layers of significance spanning cultural, social, and historical dimensions. Drawing on the theoretical framework of Ferdinand de Saussure, every image presented on the silver screen can be understood as a sign composed of both a signifier and a signified. Within the context of P. Ramlee's cinema, costumes and props extend beyond their narrative utility to serve as signifiers imbued with cultural values, social norms, and moral messages. His visual approach to Malay customs and inherited traditions demonstrates a deliberate representation of tangible and recognizable images such as village houses, traditional musical instruments, and vibrant street scenes. Thus, semiotic analysis highlights that P. Ramlee's works are not merely narrative entertainment but rather complex cultural texts that embody identity, moral values, and subtle social critique.

Meanwhile, iconographic analysis, grounded in Erwin Panofsky's (1939)

theoretical model, provides further insight into the interpretation of visual imagery within the films through three distinct levels of meaning. At the pre-iconographic level, the study identifies and describes visual forms such as objects, environmental settings, character expressions, set arrangements, and other cinematic elements in their literal sense. At the iconographic stage, these forms are interpreted as symbols embedded within the cultural traditions of Malay society. For example, the recurring village landscape that frames many of P. Ramlee's films functions not merely as a backdrop, but as a symbolic representation of communal harmony in traditional Malay life. Finally, at the more complex iconological level, the films reveal broader cultural and philosophical ideas. The metaphorical use of the phrase "urat dawai, tulang besi" (wire veins, iron bones), for instance, is not simply a description of physical strength but symbolizes endurance, resilience, and the indomitable spirit of the Malay people in facing the socio-political challenges of the 1950s and 1960s. This demonstrates that P. Ramlee's films are capable of addressing profound questions of philosophy and national identity through symbolic visual narratives.

Taken together, the integration of semiotic and iconographic analysis demonstrates that P. Ramlee's films encompass multiple layers of signs and symbols that represent not only cultural identity and social values but also document the historical consciousness of the Malay community of his era. Semiotic theory clarifies the mechanisms through which signs generate meaning, while iconography situates these signs within broader cultural, traditional, and philosophical frameworks. The synthesis of these two approaches confirms that the visual

aesthetics in P. Ramlee's works reflect not only a high level of artistic creativity but also profound socio-cultural significance. Thus, it may be asserted that P. Ramlee's films possess both aesthetic and intellectual value, as they successfully merge entertainment, art, philosophy, and social commentary. This, in turn, reinforces his position as a national cultural icon and a legendary artist whose legacy remains unparalleled in the history of Malay cinema.

Conclusions

The conclusion of this study demonstrates the refined visual aesthetics meticulously structured through aspects of *mise-en-scène*, cinematography, and cultural symbolism. P. Ramlee not only crafted storytelling as a medium of entertainment but also harnessed the power of visual elements to convey meaning, emotion, and the philosophical perspectives of Malay society. Through a semiotic approach, visual elements such as lighting, costume, spatial arrangement, color, and frame composition are analyzed as interrelated signs, producing layered meanings that move from the literal level to more complex symbolic interpretations. This shows that the visual elements in his works do not exist randomly but are bound within a structured and significant system of signs.

Furthermore, this study highlights the importance of iconography in understanding the film's aesthetics. Iconographic analysis illustrates how recurring motifs, such as traditional attire, the layout of Malay residential spaces, and the use of specific objects, convey deeper messages about cultural identity, moral values, and societal aspirations of the time. These iconographic elements enrich the visual

language of the film and link it to broader cultural and historical contexts. Moreover, the tension between tradition and modernity depicted in the film can be interpreted through visual symbols and iconography that function as cultural references.

By combining semiotic and iconographic analysis, it is evident that *Urat Dawai Tulang Besi* manifests visual aesthetics that not only support the narrative but also serve as a medium for creating complex meanings. P. Ramlee's ability to integrate visual signs with cultural symbolism elevates the film beyond mere entertainment; it becomes an artistic and cultural document that captures the thoughts, identity, and values of Malay society, positioning it as a highly valuable cinematic treasure.

Overall, this study affirms that the visual aesthetics in P. Ramlee's works, particularly *Urat Dawai Tulang Besi*, should be regarded as a reflection of the identity, values, and aspirations of Malay society. Through semiotic and iconographic approaches, the film can be understood as a cultural text that demonstrates the close relationship between art, symbols, and social life. Consequently, P. Ramlee's contribution to the development of Malay cinema and visual arts warrants continued study so that the depth of meaning and aesthetic value in his works can be appreciated by present and future generations.



Figure 1. The figure presents the poster of the Malay film *Sumpah Orang Minyak*, featuring both the title and key characters in a visually striking layout. The design reflects several elements that align with the study's focus on visual aesthetics:

Use of Iconography: Recurrent cultural symbols, such as traditional Malay clothing and props, communicate deeper meaning about heritage, societal roles, and historical context. Even the inclusion of cinematic elements like film reels and clapperboards reinforces the film's identity as a cultural artifact.

Visual Hierarchy and Emphasis: The bold title placement and larger character images establish a clear hierarchy, guiding the viewer's eye from the title to the characters and then to smaller images of scenes. This mirrors the semiotic layering discussed in the study, where meaning progresses from literal recognition to more symbolic interpretation.

Integration of Narrative and Design: The smaller black-and-white scene images at the bottom hint at narrative content, creating curiosity and linking visual design to story elements. The overall aesthetic choice monochrome with high contrast echoes the historical period of Malay cinema while emphasizing dramatic effect.

Sumpah Orang Minyak exemplifies how visual composition, iconography, and character representation work together to convey cultural identity, narrative significance, and cinematic aesthetics. It reinforces the conclusion that Malay film posters, like the films themselves, serve as rich cultural texts where visual elements are deliberately structured to communicate layered meanings, bridging entertainment and cultural documentation.



Figure 2. The figure “*urat dawai tulang besi*” depicts a complex network of veins intertwined with iron wires, resembling a nervous system or skeletal structure. It emphasizes rough texture, linear tension, and the interaction between straight and curved lines, creating a visually compelling composition. The visual draws attention by manifesting a contrast between strength and fragility, where the iron wires symbolize resilience, while the veins evoke the delicacy and essential nature of life.

From a semiotic perspective (Ferdinand de Saussure) this figure can be analyzed as a system of signs. The signifier is the physical form of the veins and iron wires, while the signified represents concepts of life, resilience, human anatomy, or the relationship between

humans and machines/technology. The veins and iron wires as visual signs carry dual meanings—one referring to the biological aspect of humans (veins, bones) and the other to human-made elements (iron wires, technology), evoking a sense of connection between the organic and the mechanical. From an iconographic standpoint, the figure goes beyond a literal image. Literally, the intersecting veins and wires resemble a skeletal framework, while symbolically, they signify strength, the tension between natural and artificial elements, and the balance between fragility and durability. Culturally, the figure reflects how humans modify the body or natural systems through technology, aligning with contemporary aesthetic narratives such as cybernetic or human-machine hybrid themes in modern visual art.

Overall, the figure “*urat dawai tulang besi*” demonstrates a visual equilibrium that merges organic and mechanical elements, revealing tension and harmony between natural life and human creation. Through a semiotic lens, it acts as a system of signs conveying deeper meanings of strength, vulnerability, and the human-technology relationship. From an iconographic perspective, it emphasizes modern symbolism that transcends the boundaries between the body and artificial structures, making it a rich visual and conceptual aesthetic representation.

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