



FERDINAND DE SAUSSURE'S SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF DJOKO PEKIK'S "GO TO HELL CROCODILE" PAINTING

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to identify and interpret the symbolic meaning embedded in Djoko Pekik's painting *Go to Hell Crocodile* through the semiotic framework of Ferdinand de Saussure. The painting is recognized as a significant work in contemporary Indonesian art that conveys social criticism through symbolic visual language. While previous studies have examined this artwork from formal and aesthetic perspectives, research applying Saussure's structural semiotic approach remains limited.

This research employed a qualitative design using a semiotic analysis method. Data were collected through visual observation, documentation, and literature review. The analysis was conducted by identifying visual elements as signifiers, determining their conceptual meanings as signified, and examining the relationships between these elements within relevant social and cultural contexts.

The findings indicate that visual elements such as the crocodile figure, spiral ground patterns, crowds of people, pointed bamboo, traditional Honai houses, and mountainous landscapes form a structured system of signs representing social conflict and power inequality. The interpretation suggests that the painting reflects issues related to natural resource exploitation, social resistance, and socio-political dynamics in Indonesian society.

This study confirms that artworks function as visual communication systems capable of conveying complex social messages through symbolic representation and demonstrates the relevance of Saussure's semiotic theory in the analysis of contemporary visual art.

1. INTRODUCTION

Painting is often regarded as a visual language through which artists communicate ideas, emotions, and social criticism [1]. In contemporary art, paintings not only function as aesthetic objects but also serve as symbolic media that reflect social realities and cultural dynamics. Through visual elements such as form, color, composition, and gesture, artists construct systems of meaning that can be interpreted within



specific social and historical contexts. One of the significant works in contemporary Indonesian art is the painting *Go to Hell Crocodile* (2014) by Djoko Pekik. This large-scale painting (275 × 600 cm, oil on canvas) was exhibited at the Art Jog exhibition in Yogyakarta in 2014, a major national contemporary art event known for presenting socially engaged artworks [2]. Djoko Pekik is widely recognized as an artist associated with social realism, whose works frequently address socio-political issues, power relations, and social inequality in Indonesian society [2]. His artistic practice demonstrates how visual representation can function as a medium of social critique, particularly in contexts involving political authority and public resistance.

In the study of visual communication, semiotics provides an important theoretical framework for understanding how meaning is constructed through systems of signs. According to Ferdinand de Saussure, a sign consists of two inseparable components: the signifier, which refers to the physical form of a sign that can be perceived by the senses, and the signified, which refers to the conceptual meaning associated with that form [3]. The relationship between signifier and signified is arbitrary and shaped by social conventions within a particular cultural context [3]. This principle allows artworks to be analyzed as structured systems of meaning in which visual elements function as signs that communicate symbolic messages.

A number of recent studies have applied Saussure's semiotic theory to analyze visual artworks. Tri Pujiati et al. (2024) analyzed digital tourism posters using a Saussurean approach and found that graphic elements such as images, text, and color function as signs that visually convey promotional messages [4]. Lie Kamilatin et al. (2024) employed Saussurean semiotics to examine the film poster *Exit*, categorizing the signs on the poster into signifiers and signifieds, and demonstrating how the combination of textual and visual elements communicates the film's theme to audiences [5]. Julyan and Yuliansyah (2023) analyzed the poster of the Netflix series *Girl From Nowhere* using Saussure's method, explaining that the signifier is represented by the physical form of the poster (the main image), while the signified refers to the mysterious narrative surrounding the character Nanno [6]. Sobur (2025) investigated the digital illustration "Indonesia Baik-Baik Saja" using Saussure's theory and revealed that the elements of graphic design, color, and typography in the illustration function as sign components that collectively represent Indonesia's political situation [7]. The findings of these studies generally affirm that the application of the concepts of signifier and signified in visual media such as posters and illustrations is effective in uncovering hidden messages within design. However, the existing literature largely focuses on promotional or entertainment media; comparable studies addressing critical painting practices remain very limited.

Although Djoko Pekik's artworks have been widely discussed in relation to formal aesthetics, historical context, and social realism, limited research has specifically applied Saussure's structural semiotic framework to analyze the symbolic meaning of his paintings. In particular, the painting *Go to Hell Crocodile* has rarely been examined as a systematic visual sign structure in which meaning emerges from relationships between visual elements. This condition indicates a research gap in the application of structural semiotics to the analysis of contemporary Indonesian painting.

Therefore, this study aims to analyze the symbolic meaning of visual elements in the painting *Go to Hell Crocodile* by Djoko Pekik using Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic approach. The study focuses on identifying visual elements as signifiers, determining their conceptual meanings as signified, and interpreting the relationships between these elements within relevant social and cultural contexts. By examining the painting as a structured visual sign system, this research seeks to contribute to the development of semiotic studies in the field of fine arts and to provide a deeper understanding of how artworks function as media of social criticism.

2. METHODS

This study employs a qualitative research design using a semiotic analysis approach based on Ferdinand de Saussure's theory to examine the symbolic meaning embedded in the painting *Go to Hell Crocodile* by Djoko Pekik. A qualitative approach was selected because the research aims to interpret visual meaning and understand symbolic relationships between visual elements rather than to measure variables quantitatively. In the context of fine art research, artworks are considered visual texts that contain structured systems of signs, making semiotic analysis an appropriate methodological framework for investigating visual communication in artworks.

Research Object

The object of this research is the painting *Go to Hell Crocodile* created by Djoko Pekik in 2014 using oil on canvas with dimensions of approximately 275 × 600 cm. The painting was selected using purposive sampling based on several considerations, including its artistic significance, socio-political content, and visual complexity that enables in-depth semiotic interpretation. In qualitative art research, artworks are treated as cultural artifacts that contain symbolic meaning and reflect social and historical contexts. Therefore, the selected painting is positioned as the primary source of visual data in this study.

Unit of Analysis

The unit of analysis in this research consists of visual elements identified within the painting that function as signifiers. These visual elements include:

- a) Objects and figures (e.g., crocodile, human crowd, traditional house)
- b) Visual attributes (e.g., color, size, gesture, spatial position)
- c) Compositional structures (e.g., direction of movement, visual dominance, spatial relationships)
- d) Symbolic forms (e.g., spiral patterns, pointed bamboo)

Each visual element is analyzed as a signifier that represents a conceptual meaning or signified within a broader visual sign system.

Data Collection Techniques

Data collection in this study was conducted through three main techniques:

- a) Visual Observation
Visual observation was carried out by carefully examining the formal and compositional elements of the painting, including shape, color, texture, spatial arrangement, and visual relationships between elements. This process aims to identify visual components that function as signifiers within the artwork.
- b) Documentation Study
Documentation was collected from exhibition catalogs, photographic reproductions of the artwork, and archival records related to the painting. This documentation provides contextual information regarding the artwork's creation, exhibition history, and visual characteristics.
- c) Literature Review
A literature review was conducted to obtain theoretical and contextual references related to semiotic theory, contemporary art studies, and socio-political themes represented in the artwork. Relevant scholarly sources were used to support the interpretation of symbolic meaning in the analysis process.

Data Analysis Procedure

The data analysis in this study follows a systematic semiotic interpretation procedure adapted from qualitative visual analysis methods. The analysis was conducted through four stages:

- a) Identification of Signifiers
Visual elements within the painting were identified and categorized as signifiers based on their observable physical characteristics.
- b) Classification of Signified Concepts
Each signifier was associated with a conceptual meaning (signified) derived from cultural, social, and contextual references relevant to the artwork.
- c) Analysis of Sign Relationships
The relationships between signifiers and signified were examined to identify patterns of meaning within the visual structure of the painting. This stage focuses on identifying:
 - visual dominance
 - contrast
 - opposition
 - spatial hierarchy
 - symbolic interaction between elements
- d) Contextual Interpretation
The interpreted meanings were analyzed within broader social and historical contexts related to socio-political issues, power relations, and natural resource conflicts represented in the artwork.

This analytical procedure allows the painting to be examined as a structured system of visual signs in which meaning emerges from relationships between visual elements rather than from isolated symbols.

Research Instrument

In qualitative research, the primary research instrument is the researcher as a human instrument who performs observation, interpretation, and analytical decision-making throughout the research process. The researcher's role includes identifying visual elements, interpreting symbolic meanings, and relating visual signs to socio-cultural contexts.

Supporting instruments used in this study include:

- a) Visual documentation of the artwork
- b) Field notes and observation records
- c) Image analysis software for visual documentation
- d) Reference literature related to semiotics and art studies

Data Validity

To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, this study applies several validation strategies commonly used in qualitative research:

- a) Theoretical Triangulation
Interpretations were supported by multiple theoretical references in semiotics and visual culture studies to minimize subjective bias.
- b) Analytical Transparency
The analysis procedure was conducted systematically and documented clearly to allow replication and evaluation by other researchers.

c) Interpretive Consistency

Consistency between identified signifiers, signified meanings, and contextual interpretations was maintained throughout the analysis process.

Research Limitation

This study acknowledges several limitations. First, semiotic interpretation inherently involves a degree of subjectivity because meaning is influenced by cultural and contextual perspectives. Second, the analysis relies on a single theoretical framework, namely Saussure's semiotics, which focuses on structural relationships between signs. Future research may expand the analysis by integrating alternative semiotic approaches, such as Peirce's triadic model or Barthes' mythological analysis, to provide broader interpretive perspectives in the study of visual art.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

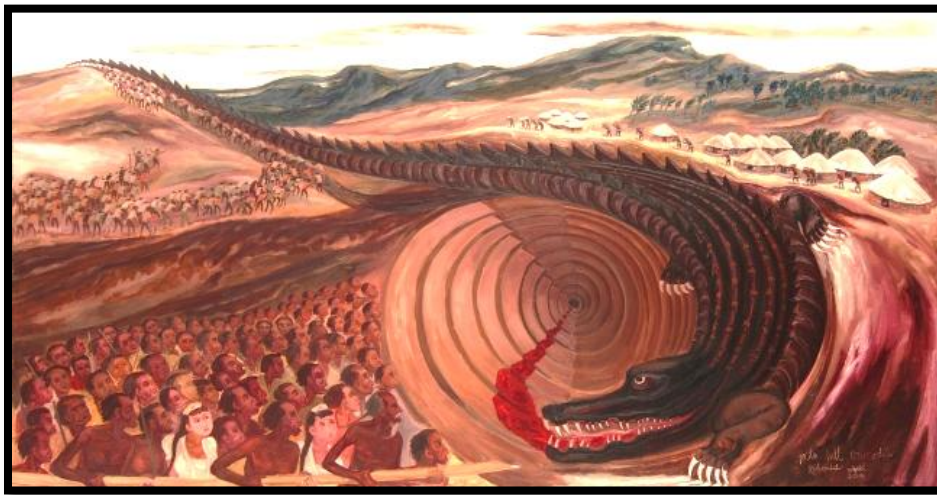


Figure 1. Painting ""Go to Hell Crocodile" by Djoko Pekik
[Source: <https://indoartnow.com/artists/djoko-pekik>]

3.1. Application of Ferdinand de Saussure's Semiotic Framework in Visual Art Analysis

Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic theory provides a structural framework for understanding how meaning is constructed through relationships between signs. In this framework, a sign is formed through the interaction between two inseparable components: the signifier, which refers to the observable physical form of a sign, and the signified, which refers to the conceptual meaning associated with that form. Meaning does not arise from a single visual element in isolation but from relationships between elements within a structured system of signs.

In the context of visual art, paintings can be understood as visual sign systems in which visual elements function as signifiers that represent conceptual meanings within specific cultural contexts. The interpretation of meaning is therefore influenced by social conventions, historical experience, and collective cultural understanding. This perspective allows artworks to be analyzed not only as aesthetic objects but also as communicative structures that convey symbolic messages related to social reality.

Saussure also emphasized that meaning is produced through differential relationships between signs. This principle suggests that visual meaning emerges from contrast, opposition, hierarchy, and spatial relationships within the composition. In painting, differences in size, color intensity, position, and direction of movement can produce symbolic meaning related to power, dominance, resistance, or social tension. Therefore, semiotic analysis in visual art focuses on identifying patterns of relationships between visual elements rather than merely describing individual symbols.

In this study, Saussure's semiotic framework is applied to examine the painting *Go to Hell Crocodile* as a structured visual sign system. Each visual element is analyzed as a signifier that represents a conceptual meaning (signified), and the relationships between these elements are interpreted within relevant socio-cultural contexts. This analytical approach enables a systematic understanding of how symbolic meaning is constructed through visual composition in contemporary Indonesian painting.

3.2. Visual Description of the Painting Go to Hell Crocodile

The painting *Go to Hell Crocodile* presents a large-scale visual composition dominated by a monumental crocodile figure positioned at the center of the pictorial space. Surrounding this central figure is a mass of human figures moving collectively toward the crocodile, creating a dynamic visual flow that directs the viewer's attention to the focal point of the composition. The visual arrangement establishes a hierarchical structure in which the crocodile occupies a position of dominance, while the human figures appear smaller and spatially subordinate.

From a formal perspective, the composition demonstrates strong visual contrasts in scale, movement, and spatial orientation. The exaggerated size of the crocodile compared to the human figures creates a symbolic hierarchy that suggests an imbalance of power. The directional movement of the crowd toward the crocodile reinforces a sense of tension and confrontation within the visual narrative.

Additional visual elements contribute to the symbolic structure of the composition. Spiral patterns on the ground create a visual pathway leading toward the crocodile's mouth, suggesting movement, absorption, or extraction. The presence of pointed bamboo carried by several figures indicates resistance or defensive action. In the background, a small dome-shaped structure identified as a Honai traditional house represents cultural identity and local community presence. The mountainous landscape further situates the scene within a geographical environment associated with natural resource exploitation.

These visual components interact to form a coherent system of signs in which meaning is generated through spatial relationships, visual contrasts, and symbolic associations. Rather than functioning as isolated images, the elements operate collectively to construct a visual narrative about conflict, power relations, and social resistance.

3.3. Semiotic Analysis of Visual Elements

The semiotic analysis identifies key visual elements in the painting as signifiers and interprets their associated meanings as signified concepts within a structured visual system. The analysis focuses on the relationships between visual elements and their symbolic functions in representing social dynamics.

Table 1. Visual Element Analysis Based on Saussure's Semiotics

NO	Signifier	Signified	Interpretive Meaning
1.	Giant crocodile figure dominating the composition	Institutional power	Symbol of authority or dominant power controlling resources
2.	Spiral ground pattern leading toward the crocodile	Resource extraction	Representation of continuous exploitation of natural resources
3.	Crowd of people moving collectively	Community or society	Representation of collective social response to power structures
4.	Human figures carrying pointed bamboo	Resistance	Symbol of social protest and defense of community rights
5.	Long line of people extending toward the center	Social mobilization	Representation of organized collective movement
6.	Honai traditional house in the background	Cultural identity	Symbol of indigenous community presence
7.	Mountainous landscape	Natural environment	Representation of geographical context of resource conflict
8.	Red color around the crocodile's mouth and ground	Danger or violence	Symbol of tension and social conflict
9.	Disproportionate size between crocodile and humans	Power inequality	Representation of structural imbalance in social relations

3.4. Analytical Interpretation

The relationship between the crocodile figure and the crowd of people forms a central symbolic opposition that structures the meaning of the painting. The crocodile represents a dominant force associated with authority, power, or institutional control, while the human figures represent collective resistance or vulnerability. This opposition reflects a fundamental principle in structural semiotics in which meaning emerges from contrasts between elements within a system.

The spiral ground pattern reinforces the symbolic interpretation of extraction and consumption. Its visual direction toward the crocodile's mouth suggests a continuous flow of resources toward a central power structure. This relationship between spatial movement and symbolic meaning illustrates how compositional design contributes to the construction of social narratives within visual art.

The presence of pointed bamboo introduces an element of resistance within the visual system. Unlike passive figures, these human figures display active gestures that signify defense and confrontation. This visual contrast between dominance and resistance creates a dynamic tension that shapes the overall interpretation of the painting.

Furthermore, the inclusion of cultural and environmental elements such as the Honai house and mountainous landscape situates the visual narrative within a specific socio-cultural context. These elements function as contextual signifiers that connect the symbolic meaning of the painting to issues related to indigenous identity, territorial rights, and environmental change.

3.5. Contextual Interpretation of Meaning

The symbolic relationships identified in the visual composition can be interpreted within broader socio-political contexts related to natural resource management and social inequality. In many regions, large-scale industrial activities have transformed natural landscapes and affected local communities, creating tensions between economic development and environmental sustainability.

Within this context, the dominant crocodile figure can be interpreted as a representation of centralized power structures, such as corporations, institutions, or political authorities, that exert control over natural resources. The collective movement of human figures toward the crocodile reflects social resistance or community response to perceived threats to livelihood and cultural identity.

The spiral pattern on the ground reinforces the interpretation of resource extraction processes, suggesting the continuous removal of natural resources from local environments. The visual direction toward the crocodile's mouth symbolizes the concentration of benefits or power within a limited authority structure. This interpretation demonstrates how visual composition can represent complex socio-economic relationships through symbolic imagery.

Overall, the painting *Go to Hell Crocodile* can be understood as a visual representation of structural conflict between dominant power and community resistance. The meaning of the artwork emerges not from individual symbols alone but from the interaction between visual elements within a unified system of signs. This finding supports the theoretical principle that meaning in visual art is constructed through relationships between signifiers rather than through isolated visual objects.

4. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that Djoko Pekik's painting *Go to Hell Crocodile* can be understood as a structured visual sign system in which meaning is constructed through relationships between visual elements functioning as signifiers and their associated conceptual meanings as signified. The semiotic analysis reveals that the dominant crocodile figure represents centralized power or authority, while the collective movement of human figures symbolizes social resistance and community response. The disproportionate scale between the crocodile and the human figures creates a visual hierarchy that signifies power inequality within the social structure.

The findings indicate that symbolic meaning in the painting emerges from differential relationships between visual elements, including contrast, spatial arrangement, and compositional dominance. Elements such as spiral ground patterns, pointed bamboo, traditional Honai houses, and mountainous landscapes function as contextual signifiers that connect the visual narrative to issues related to natural resource exploitation, social conflict, and cultural identity. This result supports the theoretical assumption that artworks operate as visual communication systems capable of conveying complex socio-political messages through symbolic representation.

From a theoretical perspective, this study confirms the relevance of Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic framework in analyzing visual art as a structured system of signs. The research contributes to the development of semiotic studies in fine arts by demonstrating how structural relationships between visual elements can be systematically interpreted to reveal symbolic meaning in contemporary painting. From a practical perspective, the findings provide a methodological reference for researchers, art educators, and students in conducting visual semiotic analysis of artworks, particularly in the context of contemporary Indonesian art.

However, this study has several limitations. First, the interpretation of visual meaning in semiotic analysis is inherently influenced by the researcher's cultural and theoretical perspective, which may result in subjective interpretation. Second, the analysis relies solely on Saussure's structural semiotic approach, which emphasizes binary relationships between signifiers and signified. Future research may expand the analytical framework by incorporating alternative semiotic perspectives, such as Charles Sanders Peirce's triadic model or Roland Barthes' theory of myth, to provide broader interpretive dimensions in the study of visual art.

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