SACRED, CORRUPT, AND HEROIC: TYPOLOGIES OF THE USTAZ IN INDONESIAN HORROR FILM

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Abstract

In the post–New Order era, the horror-religious genre in Indonesia has experienced a surge in popularity, reflecting a complex interplay of public anxieties and fantasies regarding religious authority. Although this phenomenon has attracted scholarly attention, existing interpretations remain largely confined to a "desacralization" framework that narrows the understanding of the diversity of ustaz figures. Such approaches often overlook the connection between on-screen representations and broader socio-cultural dynamics, particularly the shifting locus of religious authority within the new media ecosystem. This study adopts a literary and cultural studies perspective, employing a functional typology analysis of selected Indonesian horror-religious films released after New Order era. The analysis identifies three main archetypes of the ustaz: sacred yet vulnerable, reflecting uncertainty over the relevance of traditional authority; corrupt or corporatized, offering a critique of the commodification of preaching; and heroic and re-sacralized, presenting a collective fantasy of an ideal Islamic leader who is modern, strong, and protective. The findings reveal that these archetypes represent a symbolic arena where the public negotiates the crisis and reconstruction of religious authority in the post–New Order era. Horror-religious cinema does not merely mirror reality but actively intervenes in it: packaging societal anxieties, critiques, and aspirations into accessible yet meaning-laden visual narratives. This research thus positions film as a strategic interdisciplinary pathway for understanding the intersections of religion, media, and the market in Indonesia, while offering a significant contribution to global discourses on the contestation of religious authority.

Keywords: horror film, religious, representation, ustaz.

INTRODUCTION

The horror genre has become a cultural phenomenon in Indonesian cinema in the post-Reformasi 1998 era, reflecting the complex dynamics between religion, media, and society (Izus Salam & Komarudin Shaleh, 2023; Kurnaiawan, 2023; Permana, 2014). Although many studies have explored the religious dimensions of Indonesian horror cinema, previous research has tended to focus primarily on religious symbolism without examining in depth the representation of religious figures, particularly ustaz, as a reflection of broader socio-cultural transformations (Debby et al., 2020; Kusumadinata, 2023). This academic gap is precisely the space that this study seeks to address.

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The resurgence of the horror-religious genre not only signifies a transformation of the film industry but also represents the collective anxieties of Indonesian society in negotiating modernity and social change. However, most existing studies remain confined to conventional textual analysis without integrating cultural theory approaches that can reveal the ideological dimensions of these representations (Paramaditha, 2015; Suryadi, 2015). The novelty of this research lies in applying John Fiske's (1989) framework of polysemy to analyze the representation of the ustaz as an arena of meaning contestation within the context of contemporary Indonesian society.

Within the development of Indonesian horror cinema, the representation of religious figures, especially the ustaz, has undergone significant evolution. Whereas in the early years of Indonesian horror cinema the ustaz typically appeared as a sacred, unshakable helper figure (Paramaditha, 2015), more recent developments reveal complex portrayals that reflect the contemporary dynamics of religiosity in Indonesia. Preliminary findings of this study identify three typologies of ustaz representation that have not been highlighted in previous scholarship: first, the sacred-yet-vulnerable ustaz, which represents the crisis of traditional religious authority; second, the corrupt-or-corporatized ustaz, which critiques the commodification of religion in capitalist society; and third, the heroic ustaz, which reflects the longing for an ideal form of spiritual leadership.

This study employs a cultural text analysis approach by applying Fiske's theoretical framework to four post–New Order Indonesian horror films. The academic contribution of this research lies in its ability to reveal how horror-religious cinema functions as a form of "cultural technology" that not only reflects but also actively shapes discourses on religious authority in modern society. The findings demonstrate that the multiperspectival representation of the ustaz in horror cinema serves as a site of negotiation for religious values within the context of a modern capitalist society.

This research not only fills a scholarly gap in the study of film and religion in Indonesia but also offers a new theoretical perspective for understanding the transformation of religious authority in contemporary Muslim societies. Theoretically, it enriches the field of cultural studies by demonstrating the relevance

of Fiske's framework in the context of modern Muslim communities, while practically, it provides a more nuanced understanding of the triangular relationship between religion, media, and the market in Indonesia's changing social landscape.

Within this framework, the study identifies three main typologies of ustaz representation: (1) sacred-yet-vulnerable, highlighting the crisis of traditional authority; (2) corrupt-or-corporatized, reflecting public criticism of the commodification of preaching; and (3) heroic, embodying the fantasy of re-sacralizing the religious figure. These three typologies are examined through John Fiske's concepts of codes, representation, and ideology, in order to understand how meanings are produced, negotiated, and contested in post–New Order Indonesian horror cinema.

LITERARY REVIEWS

Studies on Indonesian horror cinema in the post-Reformasi era reveal a tendency to read horror films as a complex arena of religious and ideological representation. Debby et al. (2020), for instance, highlights how post–New Order horror films are often perceived as forms of desacralization of religion. Through reception studies, she found that audiences frequently occupy oppositional positions toward religious symbols in film, influenced by their personal and religious backgrounds. However, Yohana's research remains limited to audience responses and does not elaborate on the cinematic construction of religious figures on screen.

Another study by Arwani & Bakti (2024) examined Islamic communication in the film Qodrat, which portrays the ustaz as a heroic religious figure. They demonstrate that the horror-religious genre does not always indicate desacralization, but can also stage re-sacralization narratives through the practice of ruqyah. This finding is significant in showing the diversity of religious figure representation, although their analysis is more concerned with the dakwah dimension than with the cinematic construction of the ustaz.

In a broader context, Mohamad Rasit & Razali (2018) research in Malaysia emphasized the role of shariah-compliant films as effective media for da'wa, while Riyadi & Tsuroyya (2023) revealed how religious experience and education shape students' interpretations of mystical content. These two studies provide methodological

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insights that audience reception cannot be separated from its religious context. However, neither specifically addresses the representation of ustaz in horror films.

Christyanto (2021) study on The Conjuring Universe demonstrates that the religious background of audiences influences their reception of religious symbols. Similarly, research by Ramadhan et al. (2024) analyzing netizens' reactions to the Thaghut (2024) shows how religious symbols are often perceived as being exploited for commercial purposes. Both studies underscore the public's sensitivity toward religious representation in popular media.

From this review, it is evident that previous scholarship has examined horror-religious films from the perspectives of audience reception, dakwah, and religious symbolism. However, no study has yet systematically mapped the typologies of ustaz in Indonesian horror-religious cinema in the post–New Order era. The figure of the ustaz, in fact, plays a central role as a representation of religious authority and as an arena of ideological negotiation. Therefore, this study seeks to fill this gap by offering a functional typology analysis of ustaz representation: sacred yet vulnerable, corrupt or corporatized, and heroic.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs an interpretive qualitative approach using cultural text analysis to examine the representation of the ustaz in Indonesian horror-religious cinema. This approach was chosen for its ability to uncover the ideological meanings and cultural dimensions embedded within film texts (Francis & Fiske, 1989). The primary data consist of four post–New Order Indonesian horror-religious films selected through purposive sampling, based on the following criteria: (1) produced between 1998 and 2023, (2) featuring the ustaz as a significant character with a minimum screen presence of 15 minutes, and (3) presenting variations in the representation of religious authority. The five films selected are Jelangkung (2001), Pengabdi Setan (2017), Qodrat (2022), Qorin (2022), and Thaghut (2024). The sampling was conducted with consideration of both temporal representation and typological variation, in order to provide a comprehensive overview.
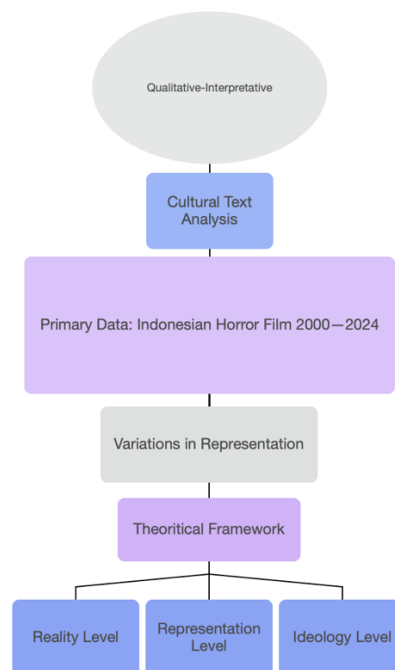
Figure 1. Research Method

Data analysis was conducted through close textual reading, guided by Francis & Fiske (1989) three-level framework of analysis:

1. Reality Level: Examining social and technical codes through the analysis of visual signs (costume, setting, props) and performative aspects (language, ritual, gesture) that construct the identity of the ustaz.

2. Representation Level: Analyzing cinematic and narrative codes, including visual composition (shot, angle, lighting), sound design, and narrative structure that shape the representation of religious authority.

3. Ideological Level: Critiquing ideological codes by exploring how the representation of the ustaz reproduces, negotiates, or challenges dominant discourses of religious authority within the Indonesian socio-cultural context.

This study further employs Fiske's theory to analyze how film texts open spaces for dominant, negotiated, and oppositional readings. To ensure data validity, triangulation was applied through: (1) comparative analysis across films and (2) cross-checking with relevant literature. The analysis was carried out in two stages: (1) description of visual and narrative elements, and (2) interpretation of meaning within

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the socio-cultural context.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The growth of Indonesian horror cinema in the post-Reformasi era reflects a dynamic and significant shift within the national film landscape. Whereas during the New Order period horror was often regarded as a second-tier genre, since the early 2000s it has transformed into one of the pillars of the film industry. This trend is marked not only by the increasing volume of productions but also by the diversification of themes and narrative strategies that intertwine horror with social issues, religiosity, and popular culture. This phenomenon can be seen in the infographic below, which illustrates the evolution of Indonesian horror cinema in the post-New Order period, highlighting production surges, key milestones in horror film releases, and moments of revival that have secured the genre a strategic position within the national film industry.
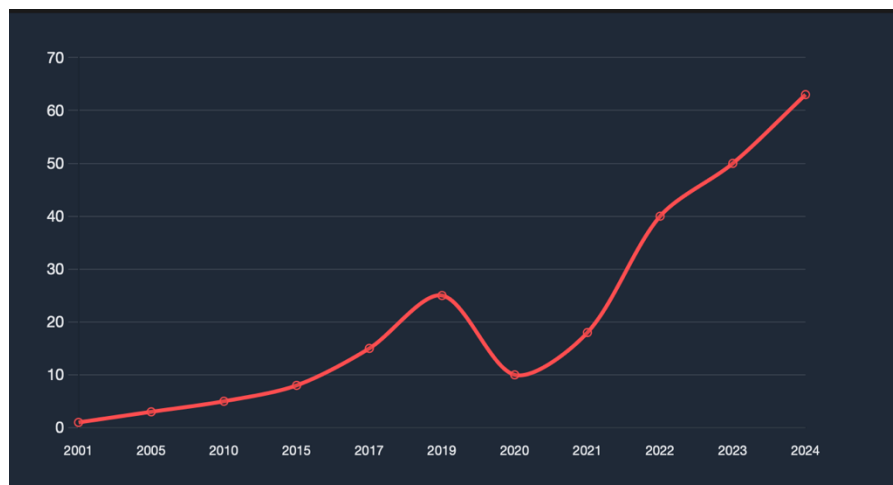
Figure 2. Graphic of Indonesian Horror Film Screenings

The graph above illustrates the development of Indonesian horror film production from 2001 to 2024. In the early 2000s, the number of horror films produced remained relatively low, ranging between one and five titles per year. However, this trend began to increase significantly after 2015, with average annual production reaching double digits, marking the revival of horror as one of the cornerstones of the national film industry. The first peak occurred in 2019 with around 25 titles, before experiencing a sharp decline in 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic, which paralyzed the film industry. Nevertheless, post-pandemic, horror production rebounded

dramatically. In 2022, the number of releases surged to approximately 40 titles and continued to rise, surpassing 60 titles by 2024. This surge not only demonstrates the enduring appeal of the horror genre among Indonesian audiences but also underscores its position as one of the most profitable genres, while simultaneously reflecting the social and spiritual anxieties of contemporary society.

The rapid growth of horror films in Indonesia, as shown in the preceding graph, indicates that the genre has evolved into a significant cultural medium—serving not merely as popular entertainment but also as a space for articulating various social anxieties and collective imaginations. One particularly prominent aspect of this development is the representation of the ustaz, who in real life holds a central position as both a religious authority and a social agent. To fully grasp the dynamics of ustaz representation in Indonesian horror cinema, the analysis must begin with a mapping of the socio-cultural realities of the ustaz as the material backdrop shaping collective imagination, before moving toward an examination of cinematic representation and its accompanying ideological dimensions.

The Reality of Ustaz in Indonesian Horror Film

In the Indonesian socio-cultural landscape, the figure of the ustaz occupies a unique and complex position. They are not merely regarded as religious teachers, but also function as moral exemplars, social mediators, and even political references at both local and national levels. This reality underscores that the ustaz does not operate solely within formal religious or state institutions, but thrives in fluid social spaces, adapting to communal needs and shifting dynamics. As such, the ustaz may be described as a "multidimensional actor," embodying simultaneously religious, social, educational, and political roles (Syiddik & Hsb, 2025).

Their authority today is not confined to traditional domains but extends into the digital sphere. The presence of ustaz on social media expands religious authority beyond mosques or pesantren into the digital public, enabling mass interaction with virtual congregations (Triantoro, 2020). In this sense, the ustaz is no longer only a transmitter of religious knowledge, but also a "spiritual influencer" shaping public opinion through new media platforms. This demonstrates that religious authority is increasingly determined by adaptability to contemporary media ecologies.

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Several common features define the social recognition of an ustaz: (1) acknowledged expertise in religious sciences (Amrina Rosyada, 2018); (2) rhetorical skill in preaching that appeals to both emotions and reason; (3) distinctive physical appearance that marks religious identity (Jumhadi, 2008); and (4) the role of spiritual counselor who not only addresses ritual matters but also provides ethical guidance and social problem-solving (Savitri, 2022). Together, these features form a kind of "objective standard" through which society evaluates the legitimacy of an ustaz. Recognition, therefore, depends not only on scholarly lineage but also on the performativity of identity and communicative capacity in the public sphere.

Yet social reality often disrupts this idealization. Reports of misconduct, including sexual abuse by religious teachers (Nulhakim, 2025; Tarigan & Raka, 2023), illustrate the fragility of the ustaz as a moral symbol. This reveals a double ambiguity: on the one hand, the ustaz stands as a representation of morality and truth; on the other, the same figure may become entangled in transgressions that erode public legitimacy. Such contradictions expose how the idealization of the ustaz collides with complex realities, creating fertile ground for cinematic reinterpretation.

Indonesian horror film after New Order era appropriates and reconfigures these social codes in diverse ways. Pengabdi Setan (2017), Thaghut (2024), and Qorin (2022) depict ustaz in full religious attire (robes, caps, or turbans) mirroring public expectations of religious appearance. Yet their meanings diverge: in Pengabdi Setan, the ustaz is portrayed as sacred but ultimately defeated; in Thaghut and Qorin, the same religious attributes mask corruption and moral decay. By contrast, Qodrat (2022) breaks with this convention: its heroic ustaz is not dressed in elaborate religious garb but appears in simpler, more modern attire. This contrast illustrates that "codes of reality" are not fixed but fluid, open to negotiation. Religious clothing may reinforce sanctity but can also conceal corruption, while the absence of such markers may produce a hero more resonant with contemporary ideals. In other words, Indonesian horror films demonstrate that the reality of the ustaz is not merely about who they are in society but how their social codes can be borrowed, inverted, and reconstructed to serve ideological purposes within cinematic narratives.

Representation of Ustaz in Indonesian Horror Film

At the representational level, the construction of the ustaz in Indonesian horror cinema does not appear naturally, but is instead shaped through specific cinematic choices that are deliberate, calculated, and ideologically charged. Films such as Pengabdi Setan (2017) and Thaghut (2023) demonstrate how mise-en-scène, including composition, lighting, and camera angles, is consciously employed to shift audience perceptions of religious authority. High-angle shots that diminish the ustaz and low-key lighting that submerges him in shadow, for instance, produce an image of fragility, vulnerability, and even powerlessness. This strategy resonates with (Bordwell & Thompson, 2001) assertion that cinematographic techniques always function as representational strategies that shape how audiences interpret characters on screen. In other words, the camera does not merely "record" the ustaz but actively constructs meaning about religious authority itself.

Furthermore, horror-religious films often subvert visual conventions

typically used to elevate religious figures. In the tradition of religious or dakwah films, low-angle shots combined with bright lighting are conventionally employed to emphasize sacredness and grandeur. Yet in Pengabdi Setan, the kiai is depicted with framing that undermines his authority, appearing small and powerless in the face of greater supernatural forces. Similarly, in Qorin (2022) and Thaghut (2024), a villain disguised as an ustaz manipulates religious visual codes (clothing, gestures, language) but is portrayed through contrasting lighting and ambiguous framing. As Carroll (2003) notes, deviations from established conventions not only enrich the aesthetics of horror but also generate a profound sense of disturbance, as viewers are compelled to question visual codes once perceived as stable.

Figure 3. Abah Character in Thaghut (2024)

Not all films, however, choose the path of deconstruction. Qodrat (2022) restores the ustaz to a heroic position through low-angle shots, frontal bright lighting, and symmetrical composition that emphasize stability and spiritual authority. In the climactic scene, when Ustaz Qodrat defeats the demon, the cinematography clearly reaffirms the ustaz's image as a religious hero. This contrast demonstrates that the representation of ustaz in Indonesian horror cinema is polysemic: open to multiple

interpretations and negotiations. This aligns with Fiske's (1989) argument that popular texts are always arenas of struggle over meaning, where cultural codes are produced, subverted, or reaffirmed according to the narrative and ideological needs of the film.

Figure 4. Ustaz Qodrat Character in Qodrat *(2022)*

A close analysis of visual elements also reveals consistent patterns. Chiaroscuro lighting is often used in scenes of failed rituals, highlighting the tension between the light of prayer and the darkness of supernatural forces. Framing that isolates the ustaz from the congregation creates a sense of estrangement, as if religious authority no longer functions as a unifying force. The contrast between religious costumes (robes, caps, turbans) and oppressive settings (old houses, forests, cramped rooms) symbolizes the dissonance between traditional authority and modern contexts. Even blocking choices frequently place the ustaz at the margins of the frame, visually representing the marginalization of religious roles when confronted with cosmic horror. These findings support Van Heeren (2012) observation that contemporary Indonesian horror cinema has developed a sophisticated visual language—not merely relying on jump scares, but weaving tension through representational strategies laden with social meaning.

Thus, the representation of the ustaz in Indonesian horror films cannot be understood merely as a narrative function, but rather as a symbolic battleground that employs visual language to negotiate religious authority. Horror-religious cinema uses camera, light, and framing to mediate collective anxieties: whether the ustaz remains relevant, trustworthy, or must instead be reimagined as a modern and heroic figure. Horror films, therefore, are not simply entertainment, but cultural texts that actively intervene in public discourse on religion, authority, and modernity.

Ideological Dimension: Authority, Anti-Authority, and the Crisis of Legitimacy

At the ideological level, the representation of the ustaz in Indonesian horror cinema is not merely a narrative choice but an articulation of deeper social tensions between authority and anti-authority. Thaghut (2024), for instance, presents the typology of the "deviant ustaz"—a figure who exploits religious symbols for

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manipulative and evil purposes. Meanwhile, Pengabdi Setan (2017) depicts the "desecrated ustaz," a religious figure who loses epistemological capacity and fails to perform his salvific role. Both typologies reflect public criticism of religious authority, which is often perceived as inconsistent and prone to abuse. As Feder (2014) and Poorghorban (2023) argue, the relationship between knowledge and power always involves fragile and contested processes of legitimation. In this sense, horror films function as a medium through which Indonesia's established "regimes of truth" are questioned and even challenged. Visual critiques of the failed or corrupt ustaz mirror the public's disappointment toward religious institutions expected to safeguard morality but which, in practice, reveal corruption and limitations.

This critique resonates strongly with the socio-religious context of contemporary Indonesia, where traditional religious authority faces mounting challenges from a public increasingly critical of the moral integrity and transparency of religious leaders (Hoesterey & Saat, 2017). In horror cinema, this critique is expressed allegorically—through ustaz who fail against demonic forces or false ustaz who act as extensions of evil itself. Such representations signal a societal shift: from passive acceptance of religious authority to skepticism and even cynicism toward those who claim spiritual legitimacy. Horror films thus serve not only as entertainment but also as cultural archives of religious legitimacy in crisis in post-Reformasi Indonesia.

In contrast, Jelangkung (2001) conveys critique differently—not by depicting a misguided ustaz, but by completely erasing the presence of a competent religious figure. The absence of an ustaz amidst supernatural terror is not accidental but a symbolic statement about the emptiness of authority. This absence can be read as a symptom of "disembedding" Giddens (1991), where traditional institutions like religion lose their capacity to provide certainty in a modern, risk-laden world. Hence, Jelangkung (2001) represents the vacuum of authority experienced by society when confronted with spiritual uncertainty.

This phenomenon aligns with Partridge (2006) observation that the failure of traditional religious institutions often stimulates the search for alternative spiritualities—fluid, hybrid, and sometimes syncretic. In Indonesia, this tendency is

visible in the growing popularity of non-orthodox supernatural practices in public spaces and popular media. By omitting the ustaz altogether, horror cinema indirectly documents this shift: society no longer fully relies on formal religious authority but seeks other ways to confront uncertainty.

Moreover, Afifah et al. (2025) argue that popular media has become a contested arena for religious authority. The absence of an ustaz in Jelangkung (2001) or his failure in Pengabdi Setan cannot be separated from a broader social landscape in which religious legitimacy is no longer monopolized by formal institutions but is debated in mediated public spaces. Horror cinema in Indonesia thus functions not merely as entertainment but as an ideological arena where religious authority is reflected, challenged, and renegotiated.

Within the spectrum of Indonesian religious horror, the typologies of ustaz representation highlight fluid, problematic, and contradictory dynamics that mirror societal anxieties about religious authority. The first typology is failed and desecrated authority, as in Pengabdi Setan (2017). The second is absent and vacuous authority, as in Jelangkung (2001). The third is misguided and corrupted authority, as in Qorin (2022) and Thaghut (2024). Finally, the fourth is re-imagined and heroic authority, as in Qodrat (2022), which restores the ustaz to a position of charisma and power through cinematic re-sacralization.

In this way, the representation of ustaz in horror cinema is not a narrative accident but an arena of meaning struggle concerning what it means to be a "good ustaz" in Indonesian society. As Fiske (1989) asserts, popular texts are always open to multiple readings. Some viewers may reject the failed ustaz in Pengabdi Setan (oppositional reading), others may accept the hypocritical ustaz in Thaghut (dominant reading), while still others negotiate the heroic ustaz in Qodrat. Thus, Indonesian religious horror cinema functions as an ideological marketplace, where representations of religious authority are traded, consumed, and contested by audiences.

The Ambivalent Potential of Horror-Religious Cinema as a Medium of Da'wah in the Indonesian Context

In the religious context of Indonesia, horror-religious cinema carries an

ambiguous potential as a medium of da'wah that deserves critical examination. Film as a medium has a unique ability to convey religious messages through an entertaining approach that is easily digestible for the wider public (Hakim et al., 2025). On one hand, this genre can serve as an effective means of communicating religious values through popular narratives that are accessible to society. A film like Qodrat (2022) demonstrates how horror elements can be combined with the reinforcement of religious narratives, where victory over evil is determined by the strength of faith and proper religious ritual. From this perspective, horror functions as a "pedagogical medium" that illustrates the consequences of religious deviation and the importance of piety, consistent with Fiske's (1989) theory of how popular texts activate cultural codes already familiar to audiences.

However, the da'wah potential of horror films also contains significant risks of ambivalence. Indonesian cinema often questions the authority and efficacy of religious rituals (Van Heeren, 2012). Representations in Pengabdi Setan that depict the helplessness of the ustaz, or in Thaghut that highlight the corruption of religious symbols, risk sending ambiguous messages that could trigger doubt toward religious institutions—particularly when rituals are portrayed as failing to overcome supernatural evil. Popular media in Indonesia frequently becomes a battleground between traditional and modern values (Heryanto, 2014).

The main danger lies in the polysemic nature inherent in popular texts, as explained by Fiske (1989). A horror film intended as a medium of da'wah can be read differently by different audiences. A scene meant to showcase the power of prayer, for example, may instead be interpreted as evidence of religion's powerlessness if the ustaz is defeated by a supernatural being. Popular media thus becomes a site of contestation over religious meaning, where ambiguous messages may ultimately undermine the authority of da'wah itself (Afriansyah, 2021). Similarly, religiosity in Indonesian cinema is often paradoxical and open to multiple interpretations.

To minimize ambivalence, horror films that carry da'wah messages need to consider two key aspects. First, the clarity of the ideological message must be

maintained to ensure the consistency of the main narrative, without undermining the audience's confidence in the efficacy of religious ritual. Second, sensitivity toward the socio-cultural context of Indonesia's diverse audiences is essential, as messages that are overly ambiguous risk being misinterpreted due to varying levels of religious understanding across society. Recognizing this socio-cultural context is a crucial factor in producing effective religious media (Solikhati, 2018).

Thus, although horror cinema has the potential to serve as a medium of da'wah, its risk of ambivalence remains high. The success of its da'wah function depends heavily on filmmakers' ability to balance horror elements with clear religious messaging, without falling into the trap of deconstructing authority in ways that counteract the aims of da'wah. Without such caution, rather than becoming a vehicle of religious propagation, horror films may instead erode viewers' faith in the efficacy of religious practice and authority, as warned by Muhammad Wildan (2016) in his analysis of democratization and popular culture in Indonesia.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on an in-depth analysis of the representation of ustaz in post–New Order Indonesian horror film, this study concludes that the three typologies of the ustaz figure: sacred yet vulnerable, corporatized/corrupt, and re-sacralized heroic, do not merely represent a crisis of religious authority, but rather constitute a complex discursive arena in which society actively negotiates anxieties, critiques, and collective aspirations toward religious authority amid the currents of commodified religion and the transformation of the media ecosystem. This research demonstrates how horror cinema functions as a productive ideological site of negotiation: on the one hand reflecting public tensions toward traditional religious authority deemed increasingly irrelevant in facing contemporary challenges, and on the other hand projecting fantasies of an ideal Islamic leader who is modern and protective. Thus, horror-religious cinema is not simply a passive mirror of social reality but actively shapes contemporary religious discourse through meaning-laden visual narratives, while simultaneously reaffirming its position as a strategic pathway for understanding the complex intersections of religion, media, and the market in modern Indonesia.

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