



(MUDIMA)



## Reality Bias of "Return (Kembali)" for Recidivists in the Film "Pulang" (Semiotic Analysis of John Fiske)

Patricia Robin<sup>1\*</sup>, Stefany Giancinta<sup>2</sup>

Program Studi Ilmu Komunikasi, Universitas Bunda Mulia

**Corresponding Author:** Patricia Robin [probin@bundamulia.ac.id](mailto:probin@bundamulia.ac.id)

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### ABSTRACT

Film is an effective art medium in conveying ideas, but it cannot be separated from the subjective interpretation of the audience. This research discusses the film "Pulang" by PT Kereta Api Indonesia, which focuses on the element of bias over the meaning of the word "Return (kembali)" for the recidivist as the central character. The research team used John Fiske's Semiotics to help explore the complex layers of meaning in this film. Qualitative research methods and a critical paradigm approach were used to understand the subject contextually and avoid right or wrong judgements. Critical analysis highlights the social dynamics involved in the production and reproduction of meaning. In the film itself, the concept of "going home" does not simply mean returning to one's place of origin, but also includes the process in which the character regains acceptance from his family

## INTRODUCTION

Film is a medium for expressing art, creativity, and the living paintings of humanity. This medium is also effective in conveying ideas and concepts (Senaharjanta, 2020). Language, as one form of communication message, presents its own meaning that can be accepted raw by the receiver or become a specific discourse worthy of depth and broad understanding (Robin, 2020). In this regard, the message can be presented through film, and its interpretation can vary among individuals. Therefore, it is not uncommon for messages in films to have both implicit and explicit meanings that tend to be subjective to the audience.

This audio-visual medium has the power to enchant its audience to follow a story to its conclusion, even in unexpected ways. One step taken is choosing a compelling film title to generate interest and lead to watching and completing the film. Consider the title as a showcase responsible for attracting buyers; thus, a film that "wants" to be watched MUST have a title that reflects its content.

Text research in media is a study capable of revealing the deep meaning of texts that have long been considered neutral examples. Audio-visual or film research, in particular, using the semiotics analysis tool, can detail the parts that have been overlooked. Previous research on advertising states that ads not only convey messages as they are but are also constructed with specific constructions that can become meaningful promotional content. Mapping patterns and storylines also play a crucial role in gathering the main message that serves as the container for the meaning within. Semiotic approach to communication theory shows our understanding of the process of sign representation. Semiotics aims to find signs, including hidden aspects behind a sign, whether in the form of text, advertisements, or news. The study uses Christian Metz's cinema semiotics, emphasizing the audience's meaning-making process, where the meaning surpasses the specificity of a group of people. Both film creators and message receivers can encode and interpret film meaning based on the similarity that each audience has in

interpreting films similarly to possessing linguistic competence (Marta, R. F., & Robin, P. 2019).

This research focuses on the film titled "Pulang," which won the Best Film category at the TVRI West Java Short Film Festival in 2023 (kereta.republika.co.id). The film "Pulang," starring Ray Sahetapi, became a topic of discussion on Twitter in mid-April 2023 (sukabumi.jabarekspress). The researcher, with a critical mindset, suspects a bias in the meaning contained in the film's title, especially for those with similar conditions, namely recidivists. "Pulang" means going home or returning to one's place of origin. An intentional and conscious act to return to the dwelling after engaging in activities elsewhere. However, in a broader context, the word "pulang" can reflect different meanings depending on how it is used.

The short film "Pulang," produced by PT Kereta Api Indonesia, arouses suspicion from the researcher that the word "pulang" has assumed interpretations different from its actual meaning. Bias in the meaning of words can occur when words or phrases are used in a way that contains subjective judgment, preferences, or specific stereotypes that may not fully reflect reality or provide a balanced view. The 24-minute film tells the story of a 65-year-old father, a former convict who feels fear about "pulang" or returning home. "Pulang" (or Return) should be a pleasant thing as it implies the presence of a awaited figure and moment. However, in this film, "pulang" is analogized as an embarrassing and frightening situation for the ex-convict. The context and history of being a prisoner, along with the shame, color the entire film and make it suitable for analysis as a whole.

The film, starring Ray Sahetapi, was produced to welcome the 2023 Eid al-Fitr homecoming moment and was exclusively released on the YouTube channel "Kereta Api Kita" starting April 15, 2023 (kai.id). The accuracy of the broadcast medium is also evident from the audience's enthusiasm for watching this drama genre film. As of now, "Pulang" has been viewed by approximately 958 thousand people on their YouTube channel. This phenomenon is also related to the shift in

broadcasting media, which becomes interesting when associated with technological advancements. Thus, it is reasonable in the digital era that over-the-top media gains more attention from the film-watching audience (Kristianto, 2020).

The presence of PT Kereta Api Indonesia (Persero) or KAI as a State-Owned Enterprise (BUMN) in the railway sector adds a unique touch to this film. In every presented advertisement, it consistently declares its dominance as the best service provider for the public. Such a sales approach is considered "outdated" and made more contemporary. The chosen medium is film, and although still in the early project stage, PT KAI continues to strive to present quality work as a means of socialization and promotion of the company's products to enhance its reputation in the eyes of the public (kai.id).

In the end, every visual work, especially those related to commercial purposes, is inevitably linked to ideological interests. This is because advertising functions as a persuasive message medium that consumers can use to decide on product selection. Choosing the right medium is crucial for companies to ensure that the message reaches the target audience effectively (Robin, 2018).

Semiotics is not a science with certainty, singularity, and objectivity but is built on knowledge that is more open to various interpretations (Tinarbuko, 2008). The meaning of a film can vary depending on the perspective and interpretation of each viewer. This can be influenced by cultural backgrounds, adopted values, life experiences, and individual worldviews. Both verbal and nonverbal signs become crucial in a film because they can express different meanings. This shift in meaning is continuous and never tiresome as new meanings constantly emerge in society regarding a sign (Robin, 2018).

The researcher will analyze the diversity of the meaning of the word "pulang" in the short film "Pulang" using John Fiske's semiotics analysis, which has three levels: the level of reality, the level of representation, and the level of ideology. John Fiske's rejection of the idea that the masses are

uncritically judged makes the researcher interested in using a critical paradigm that emphasizes the process of meaning production and reproduction. The observable codes through scene cuts, gestures, expressions, conversations, and narrative texts become crucial points that will complement this research.

## **METHODS**

The discussion of the short film "Pulang" is examined using a qualitative approach that allows the researcher to delve deeper into the complex meaning of a film. This research method aims to analyze the diversity of the meaning of the word "pulang," assuming interpretations different from its actual meaning.

Semiotics is the method used to analyze a sign. The emphasis of this approach focuses on communication as a meaning producer. The conveyed message will stimulate us to create meaning for ourselves (Fiske, 2014). According to Fiske, reality will not emerge through the emerging codes alone but will also be processed through the senses according to the references possessed by the audience, so a code is appreciated differently by each individual (Vera, 2014). Therefore, John Fiske formulates three main elements: Reality, Representation, and Ideology.

"Reality" refers to daily life, the physical environment, and human experiences that truly depict events that are real or according to facts. The second level is "Representation," which refers to how the media represents the real world in the form of symbols, images, narratives, and played characters (Piliang, 2010:19). Representation in television shows is related to technical codes, such as cameras, lighting, editing, music, and sound - these elements are then transmitted into representational codes that can actualize reality on television shows (Simanullang, 2018). The last level is "Ideology," which is a system of beliefs, values, and views represented in various media and social actions (Piliang, 2010:16).

The research team will use film scene snippets, gestures, expressions, conversations, music, and

narrative texts to obtain information about what will be examined. After the data is obtained, the analysis will be conducted by identifying patterns, themes, and messages that emerge in the film.

The researcher will describe the results of the scene pieces that according to the researcher illustrate the reality bias of "returning" for recidivists in the film "Pulang".

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

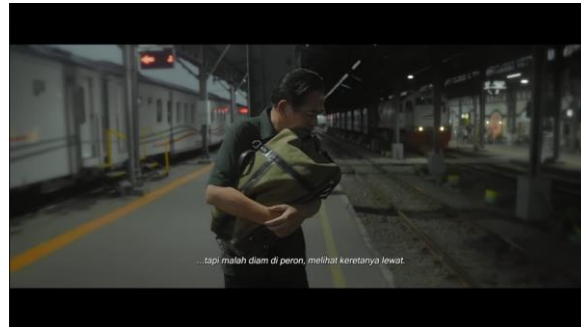


Figure 1. Duration: 0.31

Description: This opening scene features the character of Bapak who has a great desire to go home. But he is shrouded in doubt that keeps him on the platform just to watch the train pass by.

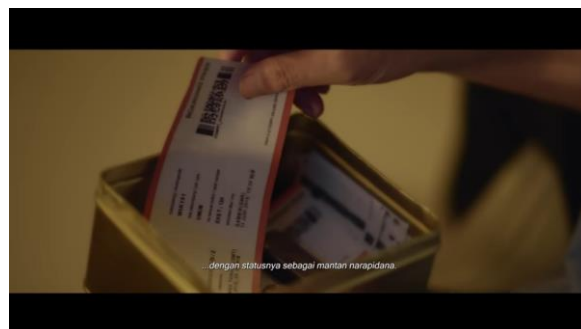


Figure 2. Scene 2

Description: Every train ticket you've ever bought is kept in a box because his status as an ex-convict is the biggest reason why you hesitate to go home.



Figure 3. Scene 3

Duration: 3.43

Description: This scene shows the railings of the train as if depicting Bapak's state while still

trapped in prison bars. He looks lonely and alone in the hustle and bustle of the station.



Figure 4. Scene 4

Duration: 4.59

Explanation: In this scene, a new character, Naila, appears as the new intern. Naila's presence

reminds Bapak of his daughter. This is a sign that Bapak actually misses his family a lot.



Figure 5. Scene 5

Duration: 10.20

Explanation: Knowing that Bapak hasn't come home after 11 years, Naila and the other railway

officers agree to give Bapak a train ticket voucher in the hope that Bapak will actually come home.

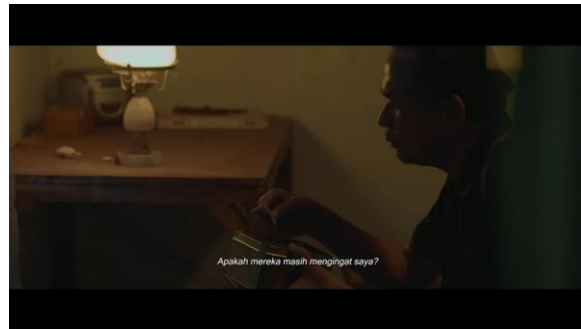


Figure 6. Scene 6

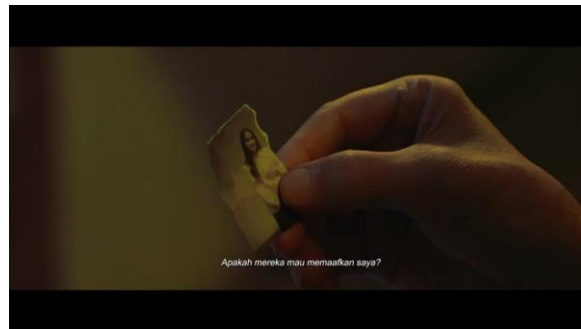


Figure 7. Scene 7

Duration: 13.34 - 13.42

Explanation: The ticket voucher given to Bapak is a turning point that reminds Bapak of his past. He still feels the fear that his family will not

accept him back. This means that the problem all along was not just returning home, but accepting his family.



Figure 8. Scene 8

Duration: 15.44

Explanation: Narti and Djayusman, the owners of the restaurant where Bapak works, have

accepted Bapak for who he is and kept him company while he was away from home. They were the ones who helped convince Bapak to return home.



Figure 9. Scene 9

Duration: 17.07

Description: After a long wait, Bapak finally agrees to go home. In this scene, Naila is seen

accompanying Bapak. Along the way, you notice Naila's face several times, which looks similar to the photo you are holding.

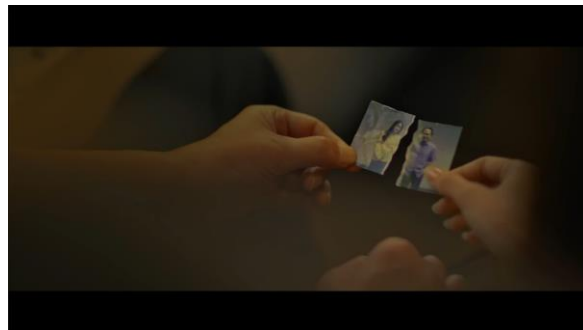


Figure 10. Scene 10



Figure 11. Scene 11

Duration: 17.23 & 21.13

Explanation: It turns out that Naila has been the daughter of the Father who has been searching for him for years. In that scene, Naila is seen

combining their photos and holding hands with her Father, a sign that she has accepted her Father with all the complexities of his past.



Figure 12. Scene 12

Duration: 21.30

Explanation: This final scene shows how they miss each other's presence. Naila hugs her Father, and her tears break because of her deep longing. Finally, the Father successfully "returns" to his daughter's embrace.

The 3 levels of John Fiske's semiotics that can be related to the above scene snippets are:

#### a. Level of Reality

Social codes included in this level are appearance, dress, makeup, environment, behavior, speech, gesture, expression, and sound.

In the short film "Pulang," the most prominent level of reality is seen in the Father's facial expressions, which tend to be gloomy and less enthusiastic. Many scenes depict how the Father reflects in solitude. This is also conveyed through the background music. The meaning seen here is inseparable from the story's background that the Father is a former convict trapped in guilt and longing for family warmth.

The Father's presence is now accepted by the surrounding environment but not accepted by himself. He feels he has a dark past and chooses to repent, live modestly, and no longer commit crimes. The environment supports this, and the film's setting is calm and filled with simplicity. This is further emphasized by the Father's behavior, showing self-improvement and regret for his actions, trying to treat and serve others as best as possible to change the negative perception of society about recidivism.

In the next scenes, the story introduces a young woman, Naila, with gentleness and warmth. Naila's attentive attitude makes the Father feel better, evident from his glowing face when given the

opportunity to talk with Naila. There is something different about Naila, making the Father feel "back" to his true self before being afraid of the stigma as a former convict. This series of moments strengthens the idea that "return" in this short film is not just returning to the place of origin but returning to family, feeling the comfort of loved ones. In this case, the Father feels he has regained acceptance from (apparently) Naila, his daughter.

#### b. Level of Representation

In this film, the level of representation is seen in the visualization presented in the camera, lighting, editing, music, and sound.

The representation level in the film "Pulang" is shown through the use of soft lighting that makes each shot more dramatic and enhances the cinematic effect like a widescreen film. We can also feel closer to and get to know the Father better because of the eye-level camera angle, making the audience feel in the same place and situation as the character.

In the final scene where the Father returns with Naila, accompanied by the background song "Paman Tua" by Nadin Amizah, with lyrics that seem to describe the Father's longing for home. Especially since the song is dedicated to a father figure. The melodious tone further supports and adds warmth to this touching scene.

#### c. Level of Ideology

Discussing ideology means discussing the CONCEPTS present in this film, but not concepts that arise spontaneously. This emerges from gradual and continuous reflection, showing a tendency in the film. Ideology commonly appearing in Fiske's television codes revolves around individualism, patriarchy, race, class, materialism, and capitalism.

The story presented in the film "Pulang," besides the gloominess of the Father's face and his life journey, is about the "new family" that accepts the Father, the former convict. Instead of being a passive family member, the Father helps the family, so they don't feel embarrassed receiving help without working. This provides a unique meaning about the world of work and the life of a recidivist. Until now, we might have thought about how those who have lived in prison would live aimlessly, considered a menace to society. The Father's journey in this film eliminates negative stigma by presenting himself as quite "self-aware."

Getting a job can be extremely difficult for those with a criminal record. In this case, the Father is included. Perhaps that is one reason why he chooses to work at a restaurant serving PT.KAI employees. He is fortunate to have a "second family," Narti and Djayusman as the owners of the restaurant. The change experienced by the Father is certainly not separate from the role of this husband and wife. Amid negative perceptions from society about recidivism, they still see the potential for good in the Father and are willing to embrace him. They become the support system for the Father and always provide moral support so that he does not get trapped in the past.

The Father's biggest hesitation to return due to his status as a recidivist is also shattered by the presence of Naila, who willingly searched for her Father for so long and picked up the figure she missed. In the end, a former convict is still a human who needs others. A second chance and acceptance from the surrounding environment, especially in this case, the family, are the main factors that make recidivists regain a sense of worth and their fundamental rights.

The biggest ideology presented in this film is capitalism. Capitalism is defined as a situation where economic interests dominate, overshadowing the interests of other lower-status parties. This ideology often occurs in situations of trade, industry, and means of production controlled by private owners with the aim of gaining profit in the market economy. Capital owners in their efforts try to maximize

profits. The film "Pulang" is one of the vessels for Capitalism to carry out its actions on society subtly.

So far, marketing has been done through hard selling, namely advertisements. But PT. KAI ventures into films broadcast on YouTube to capture the audience's attention. This also supports PT. KAI's desire to become the number one choice of transportation for all. Films (especially those broadcast on social media) will become the consumption of young people. Those who have preferred to fly or travel independently by land so far, are expected to consider the train as an alternative (main) means of travel with this film.

Not stopping there, capitalism also enslaves without actors realizing that they are being enslaved. This is clearly seen when this film becomes a topic of conversation on social media and holds the status of being "momentarily viral." From those who watch (even if they are possibly paid viewers), then discussed on social media sharing platforms like Instagram and TikTok, then viewed, reposted, and shared, until finally, algorithms run, the film is at the top for recommendations. Are social media users aware of this "utilization"? Certainly not because they tend to be voluntary digital labor.

## CONCLUSION

Although in the dictionary, the word "return" means to go back to a place or to the original condition, the use of this term can vary depending on the context. In this film, the term "return" or "homecoming" highlights the character of the Father as a former convict faced with social stigma that considers returning home after leaving prison to be a disgrace. People who have committed criminal acts in the past tend to receive negative treatment and are ostracized from their surroundings (timesindonesia.co.id). Therefore, the analysis conducted by the researcher indicates that the context of "return" in this film does not only refer to simply returning to the place of origin but more to the issues of the main character who feels uncertain about his family's acceptance after going through a dark past and how, in the end, he feels peace when he has "returned" to his daughter's embrace. Understanding

the meaning of this word is influenced by subjective judgment, preferences, and certain stereotypes that may not fully reflect the actual reality. Ideology also plays a role in this seemingly simple film. Specifically, how capitalism functions to reap big rewards with small capital. Provide simple entertainment that is close to the issues of society, then let social media activists work for free to boost the film's popularity. No need to fear a lack of audience because message and audience control are now younger in the name of digitization and Big Data.

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