Semiotics Studies in Agan Harahap's Work: Manipulation of Reality on social media

Satrio Hari Wicaksono[1], Shidqi Annas Al Haris Sholih[2]

[1,2]Fine Art Departement, Visual Art Faculty, The Indonesian Institute of The Art Yogyakarta
Komplek Alam Citra E-20 Jl. Parangtritis KM 7 Sewon Bantul Yogyakarta
Correspondence E-mail:shwicaksono@gmail.com, satrio.wicaksono@isi.ac.id

Abstract
Digital-based media art is growing massively because it is in line with the existence and usefulness of digital-based devices, which are increasingly crucial in their function in society, such as photography which is not just for capturing moments and aesthetic needs but the need to offer information to others. It no longer presents the image as it is but can also deliver a 'fantasy' and appearance that does not happen in the real world through the editing process. The easier it is for virtual access to be obtained through devices in their hands, people are increasingly flooded with text and images with different content. To minimize misinformation, it takes public agility to sort out information and maturity in tracing cyberspace, mainly social media. Agan Harahap, an artist who uses the medium of photography as his language, often uses the process of editing photos to provide a representation of the 'new reality in his work. Harahap, who is interested in this phenomenon, uses social media as a means of publication so that it can be appreciated and provide an overall awareness process. The method used in this study is a case study through a semiotic approach to reading the symbols used by Harahap in his work. With the direction of the medium of photography and social media, Harahap arouses people's awareness to be aware of the reality offered in a piece of information.

Keywords: Agan Harahap, semiotic, photography, pseudo-reality, social media

***Kajian Semiotika dalam Karya Agan Harahap: Manipulasi Realitas
pada Media Sosial***

Abstrak
Seni media berbasis digital tumbuh secara masiv karena sejalan dengan keberadaan dan kegunaan gawai berbasis digital yang semakin krusial fungsinya di masyarakat. Seperti fotografi yang tidak hanya sekedar untuk menangkap momen dan kebutuhan estetik saja namun kebutuhan menawarkan sebuah informasi bagi orang lain. Tak lagi menghadirkan gambar apa adanya, namun juga mampu menghadirkan sebuah 'fantasi' dan tampilan yang sebenarnya tak terjadi di dunia nyata melalui proses editing. Semakin mudahnya akses virtual didapatkan melalui gawai dalam genggaman, masyarakat kian dibanjiri oleh teks maupun image yang memiliki beragam konten. Dibutuhkan kesigapan masyarakat untuk memilah informasi dan kedewasaan dalam menelusuri dunia maya, khususnya media sosial untuk meminimalisir informasi yang salah. Agan Harahap, sebagai seniman yang memanfaatkan media fotografi sebagai bahasa ungkapnya, acapkali melakukan proses pengeditan foto untuk memberikan sebuah representasi 'realitas baru' dalam karyanya. Harahap yang tertarik dengan fenomena ini menggunakan media sosial sebagai sarana publikasi agar dapat diapresiasi dan memberikan proses penyadaran secara luas. Metode yang digunakan dalam penelitian ini ialah studi kasus melalui pendekatan semiotika untuk membaca simbol yang digunakan Harahap dalam karyanya. Dengan pendekatan medium fotografi dan media sosial, Harahap berupaya

menggugah kesadaran masyarakat untuk mawas terhadap realitas yang ditawarkan dalam sebuah informasi.

Kata kunci: *Agan Harahap, fotografi, pseudo-reality, media sosial*

INTRODUCTION

Art is a product of a civilization, so what is represented in a work of art is a picture of the culture in which the work was created and the development of digital technology today. As media technology is developing rapidly, especially in computerization and digital technology, changes in society have occurred significantly. The effectiveness, benefits and operational convenience offered by new technology mainly make it easier for users to explore; of course, it does not take long for people to adapt and apply it in everyday life. Changes in people's behaviour and lifestyle due to the influence of technological developments are then manifested into a new culture, a new media culture.

Then also influenced the development of media art today. Digital-based media art is overgrowing because it is in line with the existence and use value of digital-based devices, which are increasingly crucial in their function in society. No wonder many artists are exploring digital media closely related to their daily lives, especially young artists. The flexibility to build new narratives and realities more specifically and complexly is easier to achieve with today's advances in digital technology (Wicaksono, 2014). It is no longer tied to the reality that we often encounter in absolute terms but constructs a 'false' reality to awaken a new awareness of the reality that is happening.

Photographic mediums such as cameras have become a medium that is quite close to our daily lives and has even become part of our lifestyle. Almost all intelligent devices now have these recording devices. It no longer presents the image as it is, but it can also present a 'fantasy' and a look that does not happen in the real world. The easier it is for virtual access to be obtained through a device in their hands, the more the public is flooded with text and *images* with a variety of content. The public's agility to sort out information and maturity in tracing cyberspace is undoubtedly needed to minimize communication or misinformation, but what happens in society, especially in Indonesia, is that there is a lot of information defection that is used as a medium for herding trusted opinions and provoking negative responses on a massive scale.

Then tickled, Agan Harahap's desire to educate the public through his works. Harahap is known as an artist who uses the medium of photography as his language, often carrying out the process of editing and manipulating photos to provide a representation of a 'new reality in his work, an image that transcends reality or expectations of society. This is what the author will try to put forward in

this paper, how Harahap creates and produces information that puts forward *pseudo-reality*. Not only limited to fine arts, Harahap also expanded his works on social media and was responded to by a general audience from various aspects of society. It is exciting to see that not many artists can embrace all levels of society to appreciate and respond to their work, especially in Indonesia. Based on this, the author will try to examine the process of Agan's creation in forming a false reality in his work.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

In conducting a study, a method is needed to dissect it in more depth. This research uses a qualitative approach with a case study approach to see the phenomena produced in Agan Harahap's work in more depth. Qualitative research is a form of interpretive research where researchers interpret what they read based on collected research data (Purnomo, 2018). Case study research is a type of qualitative research where researchers explore a single entity or a phenomenon in a certain period and activity and collect data with a system of specific procedures and methods (John W. Creswell, 2013). Detailed discussions in case study research are generally descriptive, explanatory and evaluative. The reading of the visuals of the work is carried out using a semiotic approach as a study to study in depth through visualizations and symbols present in work. In this study, the denotative and connotative semiotic approach developed by Roland Barthes became the choice for the author to explain the meaning contained in Harahap's work, the denotative stage generally describes the visual that appears in work, and the connotative stage dissects the meaning contained in the visual presentation (Barthes, 1977).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
Art and Photography

The study of photography as part of fine artwork is still undergoing a long discussion and debate. The development of media art, which has become an umbrella for unconventional media-based arts, has not been able to stop the debate about the position of photography in the art area. Thomas Munro expressed a view that photography can be categorized as a work of art in his book The Art and Their Interrelations; he stated that photography could be included as a work practice of fine art because it requires the sensitivity of the human sense of sight, just like painting (Perkasa, 2019). However, the philosopher Roger Scruton had a different view; he thought that photography could not be categorized as a work of art because photography did not have the 'ideal' quality of other works of art, for example, painting. According to him, the image in photography depends mainly on the subject presented and not on the photographer's intention, in contrast to painting,

where the subject seen in the work is a mediation of thought carried out by the painter and not a process of mechanization.

The opposition prompted Walter Benjamin to study more deeply. His book, 'The Work of Art in The Age of Mechanical Reproduction', provides a middle ground for the debate. According to Benjamin, photography tries to touch the working area of art, but the quality of its presence and value shrinks because it can be reproduced so that its unique value is lost (Benjamin, 2005). This photographic ability to produce reproduction also eliminates its auratic and authentic dimensions. Suppose previously photography was criticized as a mechanical work process without involving the feelings and intentions of the photographer. In that case, this is then refuted and corrected with the opinion that in the process of creating a photographic work, a photographer certainly has an intention of producing a photo because it is not just displaying an image and a casual relationship; a photo work should have a specific message to convey (Susanto, 2017). With the advancement of digital technology today, image manipulation is easier to do through various software on a computer, of course, the intention of the photographer becomes more complex because it requires imagination and creativity in constructing visual displays and symbols to present a specific message. The representation presented through the media of photos is then considered equivalent to the quality presented in a painting because it can bring the appreciator to enter the creator's intention. In the end, painting, photography, sculpture, installation and various other mediums are just tools to communicate the ideas and messages built by the artist.

Social Media

Social media is a digital-based online media or networking space where users can participate, share, and create interactions between users (Cahyono, 2016). Social media grows along with technological developments, especially when smart devices are getting cheaper and more accessible to all levels of society. Indonesia is a country with quite active social media users. According to We Are Social, in 2019, out of 268.2 million people in Indonesia, 150 million people used social media, and the penetration rate reached 56%; this data shows an increase in public interest in Indonesia every year in using social media (Datubara & Irwansyah, 2019) since the early 2000s, social media had multiplied when Friendster became the platform that dominated social media. , Social media has now become a living part of modern society. It is not uncommon for an individual's existence to be viewed from what is posted on his social media so that the construction of an individual's identity is shaped and may be manipulated in such a way as to look 'perfect'.

The presence of an interaction space has a significant impact on society, both positive and negative. On the positive side, with social media, the boundaries of time and space are lost. The rapid dissemination of information and interaction

on a global scale is now easy; we can interact with people around the world at the same time at a relatively cheaper cost so that we can expand the network globally as long as the internet network can still be reached. Like the two sides of a coin, the existence of social media also has a negative impact. There is a paradox when our interactions with the distant are getting closer, but the interaction with the people around us feels even away. Intimate interaction through face-to-face tends to decrease in quality, not infrequently even being anti-social in the real world. In addition, the problem of internet addiction is increasing, the limitations of private and public spaces are increasingly biased, and the emergence of conflicts is due to maturity in using the internet, which is still relatively low. Social media and the internet directly or indirectly change the general pattern and character of people's lives. The high intensity and magnitude of social media users in Indonesia certainly make it easier for artists to introduce and educate the public through their artworks.

Connotative Semiotics

A work of art tends to have layers of meaning represented through signs and symbols. It took a particular method to interpret the signs that were later present in work, one of which was semiotics. Semiotics is the study of signs and everything related to them: the way they function, their relationship with other signs, and their sending and receiving by those who use them (Wicaksono & Zuhri, 2020). In dissecting Agan Harahap's photographic work, the author uses Roland Barthes's connotative semiotics approach as a method to dissect the visual aspects present in work. Barthes developed two marker-level systems classified in the denotation stage or first order of signification, which outlines the visual appearance that is present without being accompanied by additional meanings and feelings. The second stage is the connotation or second order of signification, where visuals are read in a meaning depicted from the visuals present in work (Perkasa, 2019). In this second stage, Barthes divides meaning into two subjects in his book Mythologies; in addition to connotations, some myths refer to specific meanings that refer to historical and cultural values (Wibisono & Sari, 2021). Generally, a myth develops over time and then disappears in the face of new myths that grow later.
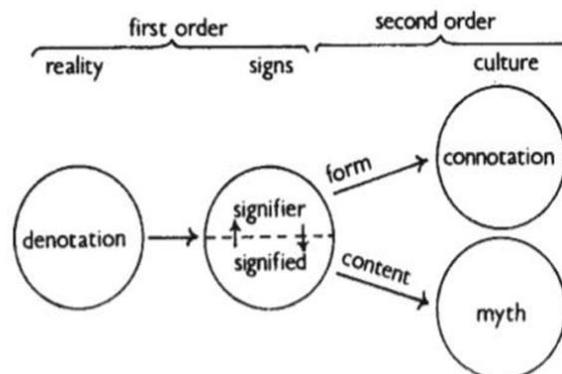

Figure 1. Connotative Semiotic Structures by Roland Barthes

Semiotics Studies in Agan Harahap's Work: Manipulation of Reality on social media

A reality is awakened from data collected, formed, then trusted and agreed upon by many people. There is no absolute truth or reality; reality tends to be dynamic, depending on the information available and how a person responds to the information; even the manipulation of information that occurs continuously and repeatedly can be believed to be a reality. This is what Agan Harahap is trying to play in his work. He tries to snuff out society by reconstructing another false and imaginary reality to invite the appreciator to see, correct and re-reflect the works with the reality that actually happened.

Harahap often reconstructs social issues around him to be responded to and reflected on by involving several public figures known to the broader community. Ethical and civility issues are sensitive in a country with solid eastern customs and a large Muslim majority. In mid-2019, there was a problem with an ad impression that was a Shopee marketplace that was considered incompatible with the customs of intimacy. The vocals of the South Korean group Blackpink, featured in the ad, were deemed to be wearing clothes that were too sexy and not by the customs of intimacy until a petition appeared to revoke its broadcast and circulation license on national television. Then it gave rise to polemics from a handful of people who agreed with the opinion and opposed it, especially Blackpink fans.

Figure 2. Blackpink in *Shopee* ads
Source: Screenshot on *Shopee* ads

Harahap then responded to this issue by uploading a work presenting a member of the girl group Blackpink to respond to the growing social phenomenon. There are several uploads in the form of serial works uploaded by Harahap to build a sequential narrative. The reading of each work is carried out by carrying out descriptions and elaborations by looking at the structure of each work as a whole. To dissect some of these ongoing works, the author will use connotative semiotic

studies as a tool for analysis. The initial stage of analysis with this connotative semiotics approach is the description of the visual elements present in work by describing them in detail and accurately.
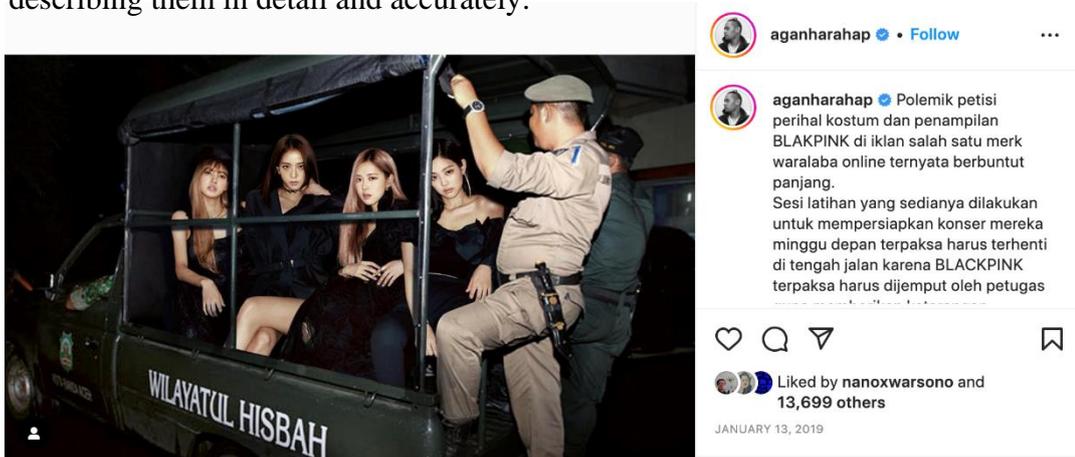

Figure 3. Harahap's artworks Blackpink #1
Source: Screenshot on *Instagram* @aganharahap

In this first work, we will see the appearance of all four middle Blackpink personnel sitting in the back of a pickup truck with a roof. All four were wearing dark or black coloured costumes, and all four stared at the camera. Two men wear beige and dark green security costumes, wearing beret hats and knives hanging from the waist on the left. On the side of the truck is the inscription 'Wilayatul Hisbah' and the setting of the place depicted in the alleged nighttime image, which is marked with a dark atmosphere and a contrasting focus of light, which is thought to have come from the spotlight and focused on the four primary members of Blackpink. Besides the visuals that are present, there is embedded text that accompanies the upload.

Figure 4. Harahap's artworks Blackpink #2
Source: Screenshot on *Instagram* @aganharahap

In this second work, the four Blackpink personnel are shown standing in a lined position and staring at the camera. The four wore matching white costumes and stood behind a brown desk on which was a piece of white paper, a card such as an identity card and a key. On the back of the four can be seen the words' BARESKRIM' and a yellow-red logo placed in a glass frame that is suspected to be a window. The setting of the place depicted is a room with brown walls and brown door and window frames. On the right side of the visual, you can also see the text that accompanies the visual.

Figure 5. Harahap's artworks Blackpink #3
Source: Screenshot on *Instagram* @aganharahap

This third work depicts five figures standing in a row, where all four are members of Blackpink, and in the middle, there is a Mother who seems to be the mediator of all the members. All four wore clothes with Islamic nuances, complete with hijabs and long clothes that covered almost the entire body of the five. No longer the same, the clothes worn by the five people tend to be different: some wear beige, pink, green, and grey clothes. The setting of the place is not clearly defined, where the background is plain grey with a colour transition from a slightly dark colour tendency at the top, towards lighter at the bottom. You can also see text that complements the visuals on the right.

Figure 6. Harahap's artworks Blackpink #4
Source: Screenshot on *Instagram* @aganharahap

In the last work, you can see a picture of five people on stage. All five wore Muslim attire in a variety of colours. You can see the figure of Mother at the front of the stage (right in the viewpoint of the picture) holding a microphone, while the other four Blackpink personnel are seen posing similar movements that are suspected to be a dance. The setting of the place can be seen in a dark room, with three spotlights in the distance; the focus of the lighting is centred on the top of the stage. Like the previous three works, there is a visual accompaniment text on the right, but it is nothing more than a short sentence without a detailed explanation.

After describing the visible visual, the next stage is to analyze the meaning contained in the visual. Reading the meaning is aligned with the facts of the field and the symbols used in constructing the visuals. In the first artwork, we will see a look at the four Blackpink personnel sitting in the back of a pickup truck and seen being guarded or escorted by two people in uniform. In the text in the truck's body, we will recognize the man's identity in uniform; it is written that they are part of the 'Wilayatul Hisbah'. Wilayatul Hisbah is an official government agency that acts as an Islamic sharia enforcement unit in Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam Province, a particular region that enforces Islamic law. They act as institutions that have the authority to solve problems of violations and social control so that Islamic religious values and norms can be enforced in society. Suppose it is connected with the social issue when this work was produced and uploaded. In that case, it can be concluded that the context raised by Harahap in this work is an attempt to describe the situation when Wilayatul Hisbah arrested Blackpink personnel for wearing clothes that were

too sexy and not by Islamic law. This is also reinforced by the text on the right describing the arrest process, which is said to have occurred while these personnel were making preparations ahead of the concert.

The second artwork shows all four Blackpink personnel standing behind a desk. On the back, we can see the words BARESKRIM, an acronym for the Criminal Investigation Agency that deals with criminal problems in the police. From this, we can deduce the context of the place and situation that took place. If it is connected with the image of the arrest in the first work, then this is a follow-up narrative where the Blackpink members are examining the Police department. The text also reinforces this on the side, which states this is a process of a press conference and an explanation of the chronology of the arrests that occurred.

In the following artwork, we see the appearance of the members of Blackpink who are in the middle of a Mother we know as a religionist and Ustadzah named Mamah Dedeh. With the context where all Blackpink members then dress modestly, introverted and religiously, it can be concluded that this visualization constructs a narrative that after being exposed to problems that highlight the way they dress that they feel too sexy, these Blackpink members began to change their way of dressing to be more modest and religious thanks to the guidance and direction of Mamah Dedeh. The text beside him reinforces the constructed narrative, how Harahap then constructs how the Blackpink members' meeting with Mamah Dedeh led them to hijra wearing Muslim clothes.

And in the last artwork, we can see the appearance of the four members from Blackpink and Mamah Dedeh on stage. It can be said that as a vocal group where the profession entertains the audience more by singing songs, it becomes normal when they come on stage and sing a song. A critical marker is the presence of Mamah Dedeh and the religious costumes worn by the members. It can be interpreted that there was a change in meaning presented by Harahap, where later Blackpink no longer sang the songs, they used to sing but now sing more spiritually nuanced songs, especially Islam.

From the four works uploaded in order, we can draw a common thread from the narrative that Harahap is trying to build how the context of the issue of modesty of how to dress was then responded to by manipulation of information about the arrest of Blackpink members to get then 'rehabilitation' to be more normative and polite in dressing. This is certainly in line with the desire of netizens who voiced to block the broadcast and reject the presence of Blackpink, which is considered unable to bring culture, ethics of intimacy and Islamic values, which are moral standards for the majority of Muslims in Indonesia. The value of the comedy presented satirically is Harahap's attempt to mediate the situation of a society divided into two camps without providing a reasonably entertaining simulated offer.

CONCLUSION

One of the functions of art is to provide awareness to the community to reflect on the surrounding environment through the tension that occurs when responding to the work. The use of social media, which is used as a showroom by Harahap, certainly provides unlimited access for local and global people to digest and appreciate his works, so it is not limited to the art community but the general public at large. The high level of social media users in Indonesia who follow and respond certainly has a broader social impact and learning education than just exhibiting in conventional galleries.

Harahap's capable technical ability in processing photo visualizations presents a manipulation of 'reality' that can arouse the response of the people who see it. Especially for some people who are reluctant to confirm, correct and re-check the situation that occurred. It takes foresight to peel information through the signs presented in the work to dissect the myths raised in Harahap's work.

The actuality of the social context raised in Harahap's works is generally a response to the social friction that occurs in society. Through the satirical parody approach shown in the work of this Blackpink series, Harahap seems to be hyperbolizing and dribbling the narrative that is 'expected' by the general public. By 'justifying' people's opinions through his manipulation work, Harahap indirectly suppresses the friction while inviting people to reflect on the social symptoms that arise. With the increasing intensity of society in cyberspace, especially social media, it takes awareness and maturity to receive and respond to information.

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