



# ROLAND BARTHES' SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS ON JAMAL RAMADHAN'S PHOTOJOURNALISTIC WORKS ABOUT THE ARREST OF THE MINISTER OF AGRICULTURE

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## ABSTRACT

This study investigates the deep meaning contained in a journalistic photo of the arrest of the former Minister of Agriculture by the Corruption Eradication Committee (KPK), using Roland Barthes' semiotic approach. The photo showing Syahrul Yasin Limpo wearing a KPK detention vest in the middle of a crowd, not only presents the visual facts of an arrest, but also includes cultural and ideological content. Through denotation, connotation, and myth analysis, this study reveals how the photo represents issues of law, justice, power, and public attention. The study uses a qualitative descriptive research type that uses Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis with the results showing that a journalistic photo can be part of a complex social and cultural construction, where meaning lies not only in what is seen directly, but also in interpretations influenced by the social context, culture, and the role of the media. Thus, the findings of this study confirm that journalistic photos do not merely function as visual documentation of events, but also as a medium of communication that can shape public discourse and influence the way society understands social and political issues. The implication is that a critical understanding of visual representation is important in media literacy, especially in the context of news reporting concerning public figures and law enforcement agencies.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The development of photojournalism as part of visual communication practices has become an important aspect in the world of mass media since the early 20th century. The initial momentum of the emergence of visual documentation of major events such as the European war in the mid-19th century shows how visuals became an instrument in shaping public opinion. At that time, journalists from the British Press used Leica 35 mm camera technology to capture social reality directly (Romadhoni, 2023). The war photos that were disseminated not only complemented the news, but also became visual historical records that shaped public perception of events.

Conceptually, photojournalism is defined as the result of direct shots from the field by photojournalists that function as a complement to news narratives (Reza Febrio Fajar Pangestu, 2023). Photojournalism has

objective, informative, and actual characteristics, and plays a role in conveying facts quickly to the audience (Romadhoni, 2023) and (Iqbal & M. Badar, 2022).

However, the power of journalistic photography lies not only in its ability to document events, but also in its symbolic and narrative potential. In it, there are ethics and implicit messages that are packaged through the selection of moments, visual composition, and narratives that are constructed visually (Fausan et al., 2023).

In the digital era, the dominance of online media and the distribution of visual content via the internet have also changed the way the public consumes and responds to news. The speed of access to information and the role of social media in shaping public opinion make news visualization increasingly crucial (Hendrians et al., 2023). In this context, journalistic photography functions not only as a complement to information, but also as a tool of persuasion and construction of reality that can strengthen or even shake the credibility of an event.

From a genre perspective, this work is included in people in the news, a type of journalistic photography that captures central figures in important events. The photo not only presents the figure of SYL informatively, but also represents a broader narrative about power, downfall, and the symbolization of justice in front of the public. Therefore, to understand the depth of the implied meaning in the photo, a more complex and systematic visual analysis approach is needed. (Assadullah, 2022).

Abuse of authority (*detournement de pouvoir*) both in the administrative realm and in criminal acts of corruption occurs because they have their respective legal realms. Usually this happens because they prioritize personal or group interests to utilize the state budget. The cause of frequent corruption is due to conflicts of interest where the perpetrators are usually government officials who collaborate with corporations (private parties). The practice of conflicts of interest itself, if carried out frequently, will have a negative impact on the arrangement of national interests (Emirzal et al., 2023).

The Republic of Indonesia has laws regulated in Law No. 31 of 1999 concerning the eradication of criminal acts of corruption (Government of Indonesia, 1999). On (October 11, 2023) Indonesia was shocked by the news of the KPK arresting the former Minister of Agriculture on suspicion of corruption, namely Syahrul Yasin Limpo. The alleged corruption committed by the former Minister of Agriculture involved the misuse of State Financial Accountability Letters, money laundering, and gratification within the Ministry of Agriculture. In this case, the KPK determined that SYL had committed corruption together with the Secretary General of the Ministry of Agriculture Kasdi Subagyono, the Director of Agricultural Equipment and Machinery of the Directorate General of Infrastructure, and with the Facilities of the Ministry of Agriculture, namely Muhammad Hatta (MH) (Kumparan, 2023). The case of the arrest of the former Minister of Agriculture, Syahrul Yasin Limpo (SYL), by the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) on October 11, 2023, became an event that received widespread public attention. Not only because of the legal substance, namely alleged corruption, money laundering, and gratification within the Ministry of Agriculture, but also because of the viral photo of his arrest. The photo taken by Kumparan's journalistic photographer, Jamal Ramadhan, shows SYL wearing an orange vest typical of KPK prisoners, surrounded by a crowd of people, with a shooting angle from above that makes SYL's position appear as the center of visual attention. This photo has been widely discussed and even compared to the Money Heist series poster and Kendrick Lamar's HUMBLE song cover because of its visual and narrative power (Ajie, 2023).

The photo that captivated netizens was a photo taken from above showing Syahrul Yasin Limpo as the Main Subject with himself in the middle of the picture, surrounded by a group of people. The orange vest worn by the former agriculture minister stood out amidst the crowd of people wearing dark clothes.



*Image 1: Minister of Agriculture Syahrul Yasin Limpo was present at the KPK press conference, as a suspect in an alleged corruption case in the Ministry of Agriculture, taken directly from Jamal Ramadhan's personal Instagram social media account (@22jamalramadhan)*

In journalistic photography, not only ordinary images are displayed, but also various genres of photography are shown. The results of the photos taken by Kumparan journalist Jamal Ramadhan are included in the people in the news genre because they present photos of people who are in the spotlight of the news (Assadullah, 2022).

In this study, the researcher used Roland Barthes' semiotic theory, which views visual communication as a system of signs that can be interpreted through three levels of meaning: denotation, connotation, and myth. Barthes explained that an image not only conveys literal meaning, but is also shaped by a broader social and ideological context. Through this approach, the study aims to analyze how the photo of SYL's arrest became a symbol in public discourse on law, power, and justice (Shalekhah & Martadi, 2020).

In analyzing the photo, the researcher used a semiotic approach according to Roland Barthes. In studying and understanding the photo to find out the signs and meanings contained around human life. Initially, humans did have the ability to find meaning in every social phenomenon that occurred around them. Within the framework of semiotics, communication is in principle considered as a process of interpreting signs, namely the exchange of symbols in a structured manner (Pamungkas et al., 2023). Communication understands and describes how the use of language and other sign systems in the interpretation process is mediated by various research perspectives, utilizing semiotic theory. The study uses semiotic theory using Roland Barthes' semiotic approach with an interrelated system of meaning, namely denotation, connotation, and myth (Hendrians et al., 2023).

Although there has been a lot of news and public response to the photo of Syahrul Yasin Limpo's arrest, there has not been much academic research that specifically examines the semiotic dimensions of this visual representation in the context of digital media and public opinion. Most studies still focus on legal aspects or textual news alone. Therefore, this study departs from the need to analyze how photojournalism can function as a social construction through a sign system.

Based on this background, the formulation of the problem in this study is: What are the denotative, connotative, and mythological meanings in the photo of Syahrul Yasin Limpo's arrest published on social media, if analyzed using Roland Barthes' semiotic approach? The purpose of this study is to reveal the visual meaning contained in the photo through three levels of semiotic analysis: denotation, connotation, and myth, and to show how these visual constructions contribute to public discourse on justice, power, and the eradication of corruption in Indonesia.

## 2. RESEARCH METHOD

The research method uses a qualitative descriptive research type that uses Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis. This means that this analysis uses signs and signs to find out the meanings in news photos during the case of the arrest of the Minister of Agriculture by the Corruption Eradication Committee. The research conducted is explanatory because it explains the signs contained in the images in the research object (Fiantika, Wasil M, Jumiyati, Honesti, Wahyuni, Jonata, 2022). The research conducted can also explain the meaning, can help answer and interpret each sign contained in the photo.

Data was collected through visual documentation and supporting secondary literature studies, such as news articles, social media uploads, and scientific references related to visual semiotics. In addition, supporting data in the form of netizen responses that provide interpretations of the photo are also used to strengthen the context of social meaning.

The analysis was carried out using Roland Barthes' semiotic approach which divides the sign system into three stages: (1) denotation, which is the literal meaning of the visual elements in the image; (2) connotation, which is the meaning constructed based on cultural codes or social values; and (3) myths, namely ideological constructions that strengthen or normalize certain meanings in society. The analysis procedure is carried out by identifying the main visual elements in the photo (subject, color, shooting angle, composition, facial expression, and atmosphere), then interpreted systematically at each level of Barthes' meaning. To maintain the validity of the constructed meaning, the researcher uses narrative triangulation by comparing the results of the researcher's interpretation to various public comments circulating on social media. In addition, validation is also carried out through peer review with experts in visual communication studies to ensure that the interpretation is not speculative. This approach allows researchers to capture the dynamics of meaning that are not only inherent in the photo itself, but also those that arise from social and cultural interactions around the photo.

### 3. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

In the research that has been conducted, the researcher will dissect and seek the meaning of the signs and signs contained in the photo of the arrest of the Minister of Agriculture by the KPK using Roland Barthes' semiotic technique. With how to interpret a science regarding semiotic signs and signs that have been mentioned where a sign can be anything, sound, writing, natural phenomena, paintings, even photos (Fatimah, 2016) and (Rais et al., 2025).



Image 2: Minister of Agriculture Syahrul Yasin Limpo was present at the KPK press conference, as a suspect in an alleged corruption case in the Ministry of Agriculture, taken directly from Jamal Ramadhan's personal Instagram social media account (@22jamalramadhan)

#### *Denotative Meaning*

Semiotics is a science that studies how a field of language in its development pays attention to aspects of life and sees signs, which have the function of sending and receiving how the wider community relates and uses them in everyday life. To recognize and understand the meaning contained in the photo, researchers first identify the deepest meaning that appears in the photo using Roland Barthes' semiotic approach, where in simple terms semiotics can be interpreted as a system theory related to signs and signs (Rais et al., 2025). Researchers identify the Denotative Meaning in this photo, revealing a middle-aged man with glasses wearing an orange vest with the words "KPK DETAINER" on his chest, showing a moment of arrest or detention by the KPK where the orange vest worn by this middle-aged man is a strong symbol that he is a KPK prisoner in Indonesia and he is surrounded by a number of people. Some of them are seen wearing brown uniforms and using police attributes, it can be identified that they are law enforcement officers.

Some of them are seen holding cell phones, cameras, and recording devices, it is stated that they are most likely journalists who are covering. The crowd of journalists with recording devices shows that this event has attracted the attention of the public and the mass media. The facial expression of the middle-aged man in the orange vest looks flat and calm, even though the situation that is seen looks crowded and full of attention. Facial expressions can be interpreted in various ways: they can be expressed, he accepts the situation, hides his emotions, or he feels innocent.

The close-up and eye-level shooting style gives the impression of closeness to the subject, but still maintains a distance as an observer. It can allow the reader to see the details of the expression and situation without appearing fake or manipulative. The bright and even lighting further emphasizes the documentary aspect of this photo (Dewandra & Islam, 2022).

#### *Connotation Meaning*

Identification conducted by researchers to find out the connotative meaning of journalistic photos:

1. Orange vest: more than just a prisoner's clothing, the orange vest has become a strong symbol in Indonesia that is directly associated with corruption and arrests by the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK). Wearing this vest connotatively means "caught for corruption", "corruption suspect", "public disgrace". The words "KPK DETAINEE" strengthen the connotation of state power in eradicating corruption. Given that the identified figure is Syahrul Yasin Lompo, the vest confirms his status in an ongoing legal case (Ramadhan, 2023).
2. Crowd of people and recording devices: the presence of many people surrounding the man in the orange vest with cell phones, cameras, and recording devices connotatively symbolizes intense media attention, great public attention to corruption cases, and the process of public accountability. It can be

identified that the case involving this figure is an important issue that attracts the attention of the wider community (Kumparan, 2023).

3. **Calm facial expression:** although denotatively the man's facial expression looks calm, connotatively this can be interpreted in various ways depending on the perspective/viewpoint of each person who sees it. This could indicate tension or an attempt to defend oneself amidst pressure. However, in the context of the arrest of a public figure in a corruption case, calmness can also raise questions or even be considered a form of denial or emotional immunity.
4. **Police escort:** the presence of police officers connotatively presents state authority, law enforcement, and that this situation is under the control of the authorities. This right shows the message that the legal process is underway and the suspect is under surveillance.
5. **Central composition:** the placement of the man in his orange vest in the middle of the frame connotatively emphasizes that he is the main focus of this event. It appears that he is the center of attention and a symbol of the situation that is happening.

### ***The Meaning of Myth***

This level is where connotative meanings begin to form myths, which are broader social and cultural constructions that often hide complex realities. In this study, the author analyzes and identifies several realistic outcomes to reveal the meaning of myths in photographs:

1. **Justice being upheld:** this photograph is part of a larger myth about a functioning legal system and justice being upheld. The arrest and detention of a public figure, marked by an orange vest and escort by officers, can be interpreted as evidence that no one is immune to the law. The myth in this photograph simplifies the complex and often imperfect legal process into a clear narrative of the consequences for lawbreakers.
2. **Equality before the law:** although the reality may be much more complex, this photograph has the potential to strengthen the myth that all citizens are equal before the law. The arrest of a previously powerful political figure can be seen as a symbol of legal egalitarianism, although power and influence often play a role in the judicial process (RI, 2017).
3. **Punishment as a public performance:** the intense presence of the press media in this moment of detention can contribute to the myth that punishment, especially for public figures, is also a spectacle. The spread of images like this through the mass media can satisfy the public's sense of justice or even high curiosity. This myth can blur the focus from the substantive legal process to visual consumption.
4. **Loss of power and status:** the orange vest and the detention situation visually destroy the image of power and status that may have been attached to Syahrul Yasin Limpo previously as Minister of Agriculture (Kumparan, 2023). This photo can be part of the myth about how power is temporary and anyone can fall. This is a narrative that often attracts public attention.

This level is the point at which connotative meanings begin to form myths, namely social and cultural constructions that simplify complex realities into narratives that seem natural and undeniable. In Roland Barthes' semiotic framework, myths work to legitimize power structures and social norms through visual representations that look "ordinary." In this study, the author identifies several dominant myths present in the photos of the arrest of former Minister of Agriculture Syahrul Yasin Limpo, which then reflects how the media helps reproduce certain ideologies through visuals.

1. **Justice is upheld:** This photo is part of a legal myth that presents the justice system as an effective and impartial entity. The representation of the arrest of a public figure wearing a prisoner's vest and escorted by officers creates a visual narrative that the state is present and acting. Although the reality of the legal process is often complex and full of compromise, this myth simplifies it into a symbol that violations of the law will definitely be repaid. In this context, the media plays a role in strengthening the ideology of law as a neutral and universally applicable instrument of justice.
2. **Equality before the law:** The visualization of a minister being arrested and presented to the public through a photo forms the myth of legal egalitarianism. The narrative that "no one is above the law" is a discourse that continues to be recycled by the media, although in practice there are still many cases of impunity that go unnoticed. This myth strengthens public confidence in the system, but at the same time closes off space for critical discussion regarding structural inequality in law enforcement. Thus, the media indirectly affirms the ideology of an ideal state of law even though the reality is not entirely like that.
3. **Punishment as a public spectacle:** The presence of the press and the massive distribution of detention photos in digital space show how the punishment of public figures is shown off. This phenomenon creates a myth that justice is not only carried out but must also be seen. In this case,

the media acts as a stage that produces moral spectacles, where the public's sense of justice is satisfied through the visualization of the symbolic suffering of powerful figures. This marks a shift from substantive legal processes to visual consumption, where the image becomes more important than the content of the case.

4. **Loss of power and status:** Visual elements such as the orange vest and Syahrul Yasin Limpo's bowed expression form a narrative of the fall of power. This myth carries the message that positions and influence are temporary, and that power can collapse at any time. This kind of narrative not only attracts public sympathy or satisfaction, but also reinforces the values of false meritocracy that anyone can rise and fall in a system that claims to be fair. In this context, the media reinforces a moralistic ideology, that the fall is a direct result of individual mistakes, not of the wider system.

Theoretical reflection on these four myths shows that visual media not only records reality, but also produces and reproduces dominant discourses through symbolic strategies. Through photographs like these, the ideology of the rule of law, individual morality, and narratives of equality are formed and disseminated in a subtle but powerful way. Barthes calls this "false naturalization," which is the process by which social constructions are presented as if they were universal truths that need not be questioned.

This study has a similar theme to the study conducted by Tiyo Sajdahfath and Gregorius Genep Sukendro (2022), which analyzed the meaning of representation in Joshua Irwandi's journalistic photography work using Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic approach. The study highlights how photos of the bodies of Covid-19 patients create representations of fear and sadness through visual elements such as lighting, color, and composition. By using a binary structure between signifier and signified, the study shows that journalistic photos can convey strong social messages, especially in the context of the global health crisis. research by Solihin (2021), analyzing visualizations in online media infographics related to COVID-19. Although using Barthes' semiotic approach, the objects analyzed are more informative graphics than direct photographic visuals of social events. The representation in this study highlights the educational and persuasive dimensions of the media towards public behavior.

Different from the above approaches, this study uses Roland Barthes' (1972) semiotic model, which not only looks at denotative and connotative aspects, but also the mythological layer in uncovering the meaning behind the visuals. The object of this study is a viral photo by Jamal Ramadhan depicting the moment of the arrest of the Minister of Agriculture by the KPK. The uniqueness of this study lies in the ideological reading of visual symbols such as the orange vest, the position of the subject, and interaction with the crowd, which are then interpreted as part of the construction of legal discourse, equality, and power in the eyes of the public.

The novelty of this study lies in two main aspects. First, in terms of theory, this study goes further by applying Roland Barthes' framework which provides depth of analysis of myth production in the context of political visual media. Second, in terms of objects, this study presents an analysis of the discourse of law enforcement and the image of political figures in digital visual space, different from the focus of previous studies which focused on public health discourse and pandemic fears.

This research provides practical contributions to the study of media and visual journalism in Indonesia, especially in the context of how journalistic photos function not only as a news supplement, but also as a means of constructing ideology and social control. For further development, it is suggested that the study expand the number of photo objects, use a cross-media intertextual approach, or combine Barthes' semiotic analysis with framing theory or critical discourse analysis in order to capture the context of production and distribution of visual narratives more comprehensively.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

In the analysis of the journalistic photo of the arrest of the Minister of Agriculture by the Corruption Eradication Committee (KPK), which shows Syahrul Yasin Limpo wearing a prisoner's vest and surrounded by officers and the press, it was found that these visual elements are signs and indications that are rich in meaning. At the denotative level, this photo displays visual facts about the detention of a public figure. However, at the connotative level, the visual composition implies a deeper narrative about the relationship between power, law, and media representation. This photo also forms a myth about a fair and transparent legal system, and emphasizes that public figures are not immune to the legal process.

Through Roland Barthes' semiotic approach, this study successfully reveals that the meaning in journalistic photos is not singular or neutral, but rather constructed through social, cultural contexts, and the power of the media in shaping public perception. The theoretical contribution of this study lies in the use of Barthes' semiotics as a critical analysis tool to describe the ideological layers in visual representation.

Practically, this study provides insight for visual journalists, media editors, and communication academics about how visuals can direct public opinion and discourse in a subtle but effective manner.

The limitation of this study is the focus of the analysis which only covers one single visual object, so it does not allow for generalization to other visual representation patterns in the context of similar legal cases. Therefore, it is recommended that further research expand the scope of the data by analyzing several photos from different media to compare visual representations more comprehensively. Further research can also use other theoretical approaches such as framing theory in journalism or visual rhetoric theory to expand the perspective of the analysis. In addition, a triangulative approach that combines visual analysis with interviews with the photo maker or the audience receiving the visual message is also recommended to increase the validity and depth of meaning.

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