
Representation of Educators Through Two Indonesian Films: A Comparative Semiotic Analysis of Teacher Competence in *Laskar Pelangi* (2008) and *Gokil Teachers* (2021)

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Abstract

*Films as popular media significantly shape the construction of teacher representation in society. Yet comparative studies examining such representations across films from different generational contexts remain scarce. This study aims to analyze the representation of teacher competency spanning pedagogical, personal, social, and professional dimensions in the Indonesian films *Laskar Pelangi* (2008) and *Guru-Guru Gokil* (2021) through Roland Barthes' semiotic framework. Employing a qualitative approach, key scenes were purposively selected from both films. Data were collected through non-participant observation, document study (screenshots and transcripts), and literature review. Analysis proceeded through sign identification, denotation and connotation analysis, myth reading, and comparative synthesis. Findings reveal significant representational differences: *Laskar Pelangi* constructs a heroic teacher whose strong personal and pedagogical competencies are encoded through symbols of sacrifice and material limitation, building the myth of the "teacher as selfless hero." Conversely, *Guru-Guru Gokil* encodes a professional teacher whose social and professional competencies emerge through symbols of collective action and rights advocacy, building the counter-myth of "teacher as rights-bearing professional." The study concludes that Indonesian cinema has undergone a notable discursive shift in teacher representation over the period 2008–2021. Implications are offered for education practitioners and the film industry to cultivate a more holistic and balanced image of teachers.*

Keyword: comparative analysis; Indonesian film; semiotics; teacher competency; teacher representation

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Received: 16-12-2025

Revised: 07-04-2026

Accepted: 30-04-2026

How to Cite: Julianti, P. H., Zahira, N. A., & Ikbal, M. (2026). Representasi pendidik melalui dua film Indonesia: Analisis semiotika komparatif kompetensi guru dalam *Laskar Pelangi* (2008) dan *Guru-Guru Gokil* (2021). *Jurnal Ilmiah Pendidikan Guru Sekolah Dasar*, XI (1), 55–67

INTRODUCTION

Teachers are the most strategic component in the national education system. Ideally, teachers not only carry out the function of knowledge transfer, but also become moral role models, facilitators of character development, and agents of social change (Mulyasa, 2021; Suparlan, 2020). Law Number 14 of 2005 concerning Teachers and Lecturers explicitly defines teachers as professional educators who have four main competencies: pedagogy, personality, social, and professional. These four competencies not only become the standard of teaching practice but also define the identity of the teacher profession in society. The

representation of ideal teachers in the public sphere, including the media, should reflect the balance of these four dimensions of competence so that the public builds an accurate and fair understanding of this profession (Wahyuni & Firmansyah, 2022; Mulyasa, 2021).

Film as part of popular culture has tremendous representational power in forming, maintaining, or shifting people's perceptions of various professions (Hall, 2013; Sobur, 2020). Through narratives, characters, visual cues, and dialogues presented in a certain duration, the film can construct the meaning of "what a teacher should be like" which the audience then unconsciously internalizes. Roland Barthes (1972) explained that popular media works on two levels of significance: literal-factual denotations, and ideological-cultural connotations. It is at this mythical level that film becomes an arena for contestation about values, norms, and social expectations for the teaching profession (Piliang, 2021; Sobur, 2020). The study of teacher representation in Indonesian films is important because it touches on the issue of how teachers' professional identities are constructed and contested in the space of popular culture.

Facts in the field show that the representation of teachers in Indonesian films tends to be partial and unbalanced. On the one hand, films of the 2000s era such as *Laskar Pelangi* (2008) perpetuate the image of heroic teachers who dedicate their lives without questioning their rights and welfare (Rawung, 2013; Aprilia & Pujiastutik, 2021). On the other hand, films of the 2020s era such as *Guru-Guru Gokil* (2021) began to present teachers who were more human facing economic dilemmas, demanding professional rights, and collaborating creatively (Wulandari & Suyatno, 2022; Nurhasanah & Wahyudi, 2022). The difference between these two patterns of representation is not just a matter of storytelling style but reflects a deeper shift in social discourse about how society interprets, appreciates, and demands the role of teachers. Academic studies of this shift, especially comparatively across film generations, are still very limited (Fadhilah & Muqoyyidin, 2022; Setiawan, 2023).

Previous research on Indonesian films with educational themes has generally been separate: most have examined *Laskar Pelangi* singularly from the perspective of educational values or semiotics (Rawung, 2013; Hutchinson, 2017; Maulida, 2021; Aprilia & Pujiastutik, 2021), while studies on more contemporary educational films are still very few (Fauzi & Saputra, 2021; Sari & Nugroho, 2022). There has been no research that explicitly compares the two films as objects of comparative study to map shifts in the representation of teacher competencies using an integrated theoretical framework. To fill this gap, the study used Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis which included the reading of denotative, connotative, and mythical signs, combined with the framework of four teacher competencies based on Permendiknas No. 16 of 2007 as an analysis matrix. This semiotic-educational interdisciplinary approach allows for a more systematic and contextual reading of the construction of the meaning of the teacher's profession in Indonesian cinema (Barthes, 1972; Scott, 2021; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Berdasarkan uraian tersebut, pertanyaan penelitian yang diajukan adalah: (1) How is the representation of teacher competence constructed through visual and narrative signs in the film *Laskar Pelangi* (2008)? (2) How is the representation of teacher competence constructed through visual and narrative signs in the film *Guru-Guru Gokil* (2021)? (3) What discourse shifts can be identified in the representation of teacher competence between the two films?

This research aims to: (1) analyze the sign system and the construction of the meaning of teacher competency representation in the film *Laskar Pelangi* (2008); (2) analyzing the sign system and the construction of the meaning of teacher competency representation in

the film *Guru-Guru Gokil* (2021); and (3) identify shifts in the discourse of teacher professional representation in two Indonesian films from different periods.

The novelty of this research lies in three main aspects. First, this is the first study that systematically compares *Laskar Pelangi* and *Guru-Guru-Gokil* using the framework of four teacher competencies of Permendiknas No. 16 of 2007 as a semiotic analysis matrix. Second, the diachronic approach applied resulted in a mapping of shifts in the discourse of teacher representation in Indonesian cinema for more than a decade (2008–2021). Third, the integration of Barthes' semiotic framework with Hall's (2013) representation theory and national teacher competency standards presents an interdisciplinary analytical perspective that has never been applied in the study of Indonesian educational films. Practically, the results of this study contribute to the teacher education program (PGSD) in building critical media literacy for prospective educators, as well as for the film industry to develop a more holistic representation of teachers (Kurnia & Astuti, 2021; Pratiwi & Heryanto, 2022).

METHODS

Research Design

This study uses a qualitative approach with a semiotic analysis method. The qualitative design was chosen because the purpose of the research was not to measure frequency or test statistical hypotheses, but rather to interpret the layers of meaning hidden behind the signs in audiovisual texts (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2019). Roland Barthes' method of semiotic analysis is applied systematically through three levels of significance: (1) denotative reading literal and factual meaning; (2) connotative reading the cultural meaning, associations, and values that signs evoke in the Indonesian social context; and (3) myth reading identification of ideological narratives that are naturalized through a system of signs (Barthes, 1972; Sobur, 2020; Piliang, 2021). After the analysis per film, a comparative analysis was carried out to identify similarities, differences, and shifts in representation between films (Sari & Nugroho, 2022).

Research Subject/Object

The object of this research material is two Indonesian films that place teachers as central characters: (1) *Laskar Pelangi* (2008) directed by Riri Riza, produced by Miles Films, 125 minutes long, adapted from Andrea Hirata's novel; and (2) *Guru-Guru Gokil* (2021) directed by Sammaria Simanjuntak, produced by Falcon Pictures, with a duration of 112 minutes. Both films were selected purposively based on criteria: (a) the teacher as the main protagonist; (b) the production time gap is more than a decade so that it allows for diachronic studies; (c) both gained widespread social resonance evident from the number of viewers and critical reviews; and (d) represent two different genres epic drama versus action comedy that allow for rich comparisons (Patton, 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2018). The subject of the analysis is in the form of key scenes that are chosen purposively, namely scenes that directly or indirectly encode the pedagogic, personality, social, and professional competence of teachers (Permendiknas No. 16 of 2007).

Research Instruments

The main instrument of research is the researcher himself (human instrument), as is prevalent in interpretive qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln in Miles et al., 2019). To ensure the systematicity and consistency of the analysis between the authors, a semiotic analysis sheet was developed that contained the following columns: (1) code and scene description; (2) timestamp (minutes:seconds); (3) verbal signs dialogue and narrative; (4) visual signs costumes, settings, lighting, gestures, image composition; (5) denotative meaning; (6) connotative meaning; (7) the myth that is constructed; and (8) the dimensions of teacher competence represented. This sheet was validated through expert review by two experts: one media semiotics expert and one teacher education expert, as well as through discussions between authors until a consensus on interpretation was reached (Patton, 2015).

Data Collection Techniques

Data was collected through three complementary techniques. First, systematic non-participant observation by watching each film for a minimum of three rounds: the first round to build a complete narrative understanding; the second round to identify and mark key scenes; the third round for detailed recording of visual and verbal signs using an analysis sheet (Patton, 2015). Scene selection criteria: (a) featuring the teacher character directly; (b) contain symbols or dialogues about teacher competence; (c) contains conflicts, climaxes, or resolutions related to the role of teachers. Second, document studies in the form of high-resolution screenshots and transcriptions of relevant dialogues as textual data that can be analyzed repeatedly (Miles et al., 2019). Third, literature reviews to build theoretical foundations, verify interpretations, and triangulate sources (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The validity of the data is guaranteed through source triangulation, method triangulation, member checking between authors, and expert consultation.

Data Analysis Techniques

The data analysis followed the interactive analysis model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2019) which included: (1) data condensation selection and focusing of the most relevant scenes; (2) data presentation organizing the results of semiotic analysis in tables and narrative descriptions; (3) withdrawal and verification of conclusions. Specifically, semiotic analysis takes place in three layers according to Barthes' (1972) level of significance: the denotative layer, the connotative layer, and the mythical layer. After the analysis per film is completed, a cross-film comparative analysis is carried out to identify patterns of similarities, differences, and shifts in the representation of teacher competence. Researcher reflexivity is maintained through trail audits in the form of reflection records of the analysis process and documentation of interpretation decisions at each stage (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Piliang, 2021).

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Result

A semiotic analysis of key scenes in both films resulted in findings that were organized into four categories of teacher competencies. Table 1 summarizes the identified system of signs, meanings, and myths.

Table 1. Semiotic Analysis Matrix of Teacher Competency Representation in Both Films

Competencies	Tataran	The Rainbow (2008)	Gurus Gokil (2021)
Pedagogy	Tanda	Reot wood school; chalk board; obsolete books; Lintang fish net bag	Laptops; projectors; modern classrooms; tidy table; Simulation of real problems
	Konotasi	Pedagogic creativity grows from limitations; Meaningful learning without resources	Adaptive pedagogical innovation; Technology-Based Learning and Contextual Issues
	Myths	"True teachers teach from the heart, not from facilities"	"Teachers are effective in responding to the demands of the times and the real needs of students"
Personality	Tanda	Simple clothes of Mrs. Muslimah; shady smile; soft voice; Keep teaching when you are on the verge of giving up	Expressions of frustration; open inner conflict; humor; assertiveness demands rights
	Konotasi	Patience, sincerity, and moral exemplary as the core of a teacher's personality	Authentic teachers: have human weaknesses but still have integrity
	Myths	"The ideal teacher is a perfect moral figure without weakness"	"A true teacher is a real human being who deserves respect even if he is not perfect"
Social	Tanda	A visit to the house of Mrs. Muslimah; personal interaction between teachers and parents	Emergency meeting of teachers; the formation of collaborative teams; Cross-Divisional Joint Action
	Konotasi	Social competence as an individual concern: one teacher, one student, one community	Social competence as collective solidarity: the power of networks and team coordination
	Mitos	"A good teacher knows each student personally and deeply"	"Strong teachers are teachers who collaborate and build solidarity"
Professional	Tanda	The school almost collapsed; inadequate salary is accepted silently; No protests over injustice	Stolen salaries are the main conflict; Employment Agreement Letter; Claim Rights Before the Principal
	Konotasi	Professionalism = a vocation of the soul that goes beyond and overrides material rights	Professionalism = rights-based employment contracts; Advocacy for economic dignity is an obligation
	Myths	"Selfless devotion is the highest glory of teachers"	"Professional teachers have the right to claim their rights; Advocacy is part of integrity"

Sumber: Analisis peneliti, 2025

1. Representation of Teacher Competence in *Laskar Pelangi* (2008)

A semiotic analysis of *Laskar Pelangi* reveals a sign system that consistently builds the representation of teachers through a dialectic of limitations and heroism. At the denotative level, the opening scene of the film shows the Muhammadiyah elementary school building that almost collapsed, hollowed board walls, rough wooden benches, and thin chalk chalkboard that is almost finished. These signs literally illustrate the poverty of educational infrastructure on Belitung Island (Rawung, 2013). However, at the connotative level, this limited condition works as a context that emphasizes the glory of the teacher: the poorer the facilities, the greater the sacrifice, the more heroic the representation. This mechanism of connotation in which material limitations are positively correlated with moral nobility is a distinctive and recurring representational strategy in the Indonesian educational narrative (Sobur, 2020; Piliang, 2021).

Mrs. Muslimah's pedagogic competence is represented most strongly through the polysemic mark of the Lintang fish net bag. Denotatively, the bag is just a container for a fisherman's child. However, connotatively, Mrs. Muslimah's ability to "read" and respond to the socio-economic context of students making the reality of fishermen's life a source of learning motivation represents pedagogic competence in the dimension of contextualization and meaningful learning (Aprilia & Pujiastutik, 2021; Wahyuni & Firmansyah, 2022). Barthes (1972) calls this mechanism "ideological naturalization" the idea that a "true" teacher is a teacher who can fully understand his or her students, including family background and economic conditions, constructed as if it were a universal truth.

Personality competence is built through the visual representation of the very iconic figure of Bu Muslimah: a simple but neat baju kurung outfit, a shady smile that never fades, a gentle voice that nurtures, and the determination to remain present even when the school is about to close. These signs connotatively construct the ideal teacher's personality as a synthesis of sincerity, boundless patience, and transcendent moral exemplarity (Mulyasa, 2021; Suparlan, 2020). On a mythical level, this representation builds the narrative of "the teacher as a sacred calling": a profession chosen not because of material incentives, but because of a spiritual vocation that puts the student first. This myth, as analyzed by Barthes (1972), works by turning something historical and contingent into one's choice to become a teacher during limitations to seem natural, even inevitable.

Social and professional competence in *Laskar Pelangi* is represented through the fusion of the two in the figure of a "total" teacher. Mrs. Muslimah makes home visits to students' families, builds community trust, and becomes a liaison between the school and the fishing community. Social competence is coded as an intimate individual concern not a professional networking skill. Most significantly, the absence of adequate pay and decent facilities has never been a source of conflict or protest; The Master accepts it as a natural consequence of the "soul calling." The myth of "selfless devotion" is built by eliminating the professional-economic dimension from the representation of teachers, as if good teachers are not supposed to question their material rights (Setiawan, 2023; Wulandari & Suyatno, 2022).

2. Representation of Teacher Competence in Gokil Teachers (2021)

The film *Guru-Guru Gokil* operates a fundamentally different sign system—and in many ways is an active demystification of the representations that Laskar Pelangi has constructed. Barthes (1972) calls this process a "myth reversal": when the same signs (teachers, schools, salaries) are loaded with meanings that are contrary to the established myth. The opening scene that depicts the chaos when teachers' salaries are stolen places the issue of economic welfare as the main conflict of the story a radical narrative choice because it explicitly challenges the myth of "selfless teachers" (Anggraeni & Hamid, 2022; Nurhasanah & Wahyudi, 2022).

At the level of pedagogic competence, this film features modern classrooms with digital technology as a backdrop, but more importantly is the way the film represents pedagogic competence as an innovative-adaptive capacity. The teachers in this film not only teach in the classroom but demonstrate pedagogic competence through "action examples" when engaged in salary recovery operations, they indirectly teach the values of integrity, civic courage, and creative problem-solving to observing students (Fauzi & Saputra, 2021; Pratiwi & Heryanto, 2022). Pedagogic competence in this case is extended beyond just the transmission of knowledge in the classroom.

Personality competencies are represented through signs that are much more complex and contradictory. The Obedient character (the main protagonist) is shown with open frustration, character weaknesses, personal ambitions, and sometimes absurd humor—all attributes that are not traditionally attached to the ideal teacher figure. Connotatively, this representation constructs personality competence not as moral perfection, but as authenticity and human integrity in the face of self-limitations (Hall, 2013; Sobur, 2020). The myth that was constructed was that of "ordinary human teachers worthy of respect" a fundamental shift from the previous myth that required the teacher to be a flawless figure. This shift correlates with the trend of contemporary education discourse that emphasizes mental health and teacher wellbeing as a prerequisite for professionalism (Mulyasa, 2021; Kurnia & Astuti, 2021).

Social and professional competence received the most explicit and most distinct representation of the *Rainbow Soldiers*. The scene of teachers forming a cross-departmental collaborative team represents social competence as the ability to build horizontal solidarity and a democratic teamwork network (Anggraeni & Hamid, 2022; Sari & Nugroho, 2022). The peak of professional representation is present in the scene of Obedient facing the principal with a Letter of Employment Agreement as proof of rights. The semiotic "Employment Agreement Letter" works on a very strong connotative level: teachers are represented as legal subjects with enforceable rights not just bargaining powerless servants. The myth that is explicitly built is that "advocacy for teachers' rights is a legitimate and dignified form of professionalism" (Setiawan, 2023; Wulandari & Suyatno, 2022; Piliang, 2021).

3. Shifting Discourse on Teacher Representation: A Comparative Analysis

A comparative analysis of the two films reveals a systematic and multidimensional shift in discourse. Table 2 summarizes the dimensions of the shift

Table 2. Matrix of Shift Discourse of Teacher Representation between the Two Films

Discourse Dimension	Rainbow Warriors (2008)	Teachers Gokil (2021)
Core Myths	Hero teacher without merit	Professional teachers have the right to speak up
Sources of Moral Authority	Sacrifice & acceptance of limitations	Competence & enforcement
Model Kom. Social	Individual care (teacher → student)	Collective solidarity (teachers ↔)
Professional Orientation	The call of the soul; Rights Waived	Employment contracts; Right to be advocated
Response to Injustice	Accept with patience and perseverance	Acting, resisting, fighting
Personality Ideal	Moral perfection; without flaws	Authenticity; humanism; Toughness
Message to the Public	Respect the teacher for his sacrifice	Respect teachers for their professionalism

Source: *Researcher analysis, 2025*

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study confirm that the representation of teachers in Indonesian films is not just a mirror of reality, but an active arena for the construction of social discourse. The shift from the myth of "hero teachers" to "professional teachers" identified between 2008 and 2021 is strongly correlated with several socio-structural transformations in Indonesia during that period. First, the implementation of teacher certification and professional allowances after Law No. 14 of 2005 slowly changed the relationship between teachers and the state from a "service-mandate" relationship to a "professional-contract" relationship a structural change that is reflected in film representation (Mulyasa, 2021; Suparlan, 2020). Second, the strengthening of the teacher welfare advocacy movement and the emergence of more vocal teacher professional organizations encourage the discourse that demanding rights is a legitimate professional action (Wulandari & Suyatno, 2022; Anggraeni & Hamid, 2022). Third, the increasing demands of 21st century teacher competencies in the Independent Curriculum policy encourage the redefinition of the teaching profession beyond just devotion to adaptive-innovative professionalism (Mulyasa, 2021; Kurnia & Astuti, 2021).

Within the framework of Hall's (2013) theory of representation, the two films operate in different modes of representation. *Laskar Pelangi* operates in a "reflective" mode of representation; the film seems to reflect the "truth" about the teacher that already exists and is accepted by the community. *Gokil Teachers* operate in an "intentional" mode of representation the film actively constructs and intervenes with reality by presenting a normative vision of how teachers should be treated and recognized. This difference in mode is important: *Laskar Pelangi* confirms existing social expectations, while *Guru-Guru-Gurus Gokil* challenges and expands on those expectations (Hall, 2013; Sobur, 2020; Piliang, 2021). This analysis complements the findings of Rawung (2013) and Hutahaean (2017)

who examined *Laskar Pelangi* alone without comparing it with contemporary films and expands on the studies of Sari and Nugroho (2022) and Fadhilah and Muqoyyidin (2022) which examined shifts in teacher representation but did not use the national teacher competency framework as an analysis matrix.

This finding has significant implications for teacher education at the PGSD level. First, the PGSD program needs to integrate critical media literacy in its curriculum so that prospective teachers have a reflective awareness of how their profession is constructed in the space of popular culture (Kurnia & Astuti, 2021; Pratiwi & Heryanto, 2022). Second, the development of teachers' personality competencies needs to shift from the "moral perfection" model to the "authentic integrity" model that is, teachers who are honest about their weaknesses and limitations but remain committed to professional values (Mulyasa, 2021). Third, teachers' social competence needs to be expanded from the paradigm of individual concern to the capacity to build collegial solidarity and policy advocacy

competencies that are relevant to dealing with the complexities of 21st-century education (Setiawan, 2023; Wulandari & Suyatno, 2022). For the film industry, these findings recommend the development of a more balanced representation of teachers: not only romanticizing sacrificial heroism, but also presenting the dimensions of professionalism, economic dignity, and the collective agency of teachers in a proportionate manner (Yuliani & Priyatni, 2023; Pratiwi & Heryanto, 2022).

It should be noted that this study has limitations in the form of the number of films analyzed in only two titles. The representation of teachers in Indonesian cinema is much more diverse, including short film genres, animated films, or streaming series that have not been reached in this study. The expansion of the corpus to more films of various genres and periods will result in a more comprehensive mapping of the dynamics of teacher representation in Indonesian popular culture (Yuliani & Priyatni, 2023).

CONCLUSION

Based on a comparative semiotic analysis of the films *Laskar Pelangi* (2008) and *Guru-Guru Gokil* (2021), this study concludes three main points. First, *Laskar Pelangi* builds a representation of teacher competence through a sign system that consistently constructs the myth of "hero teacher without merit": personality and pedagogic competence is represented through symbols of material limitations and moral fortitude, while social and professional competence is manifested as individual concern that prioritizes devotion over rights. Second, *Guru Gokil* presents a sign system that is an active demystification of the myth: personality competence is represented as human authenticity, pedagogic competence as adaptive innovation, social competence as collective solidarity, and professional competence as advocacy of morally and legally valid rights, building the counter myth of "professional teachers have rights." Third, a comparison of the two films reveals a significant shift in discourse in Indonesian cinema during the period 2008–2021: from the representation of "teachers as sacred heroes" to "teachers as professionals with identities"—shifts that reflect social transformation, education policies, and public awareness of the teaching profession.

The implications of this study are two ways. For PGSD programs and teacher education, these findings affirm the importance of integrating critical media literacy in the curriculum so that prospective educators have reflective awareness of the construction of their professional identities in the public sphere, while encouraging the development of teachers' social competencies that include collegial solidarity and policy advocacy capacity. For the Indonesian film industry, this study recommends the development of a more holistic and balanced representation of teachers—acknowledging the heroism of sacrifice while respecting the dimensions of professionalism, economic dignity, and collective agency of teachers. Balanced representation is not only more socially accurate but has the potential to form stronger public support for the recognition of teachers' rights and well-being.

Further research is suggested to expand the corpus to more Indonesian films from different genres, decades, and distribution platforms (cinema, streaming, television) to produce a more comprehensive mapping. An empirical study on the influence of film representation on the actual perception of prospective teachers and PGSD students is also urgently needed to complement the findings of this textual analysis and strengthen its contribution to the development of teacher education

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