

# Visual Representation of Photography on the Cover of Fiction Novels

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## Abstract

*As a visual sign, photography is considered to be the right medium to represent an object with all its resemblance with the reality. The reality embedded in a photography is in line with the reliability of its audience who adhere to "seeing is believing" or believing in seeing. On the other hand, carefully structured verbal signs in a storyline appear in a narrative medium, one of which is a novel. Most novels that are considered popular are then often adapted to the story of a big screen film and then the cover of the original novel is replaced with a photo work that is considered as a representation of the story in a film. This research will examine how photography becomes an instrument of visual representation in conveying the message of the content of fiction novels and finding out the imagery relationships constructed by both verbal and pictorial texts on the cover of novels. This study used descriptive qualitative methods that would describe the aspects and characteristics of a particular message through empirical interpretation. It is hoped that the results of this study will add to the discourse on the visual representation of photography that can effectively deliver the message of the story by representing the entire narrative in the novel with just one frame in the form of a novel cover.*

*Keywords: visual representation, photography, novel cover, multimodal*

### 1. Introduction

*Visual culture has become an integral part of human life, largely influenced by the rapid advancements in technology. The study of visual representation no longer revolves solely around visual arts but encompasses a broader understanding of visuality, combining verbal and visual elements in the same hierarchy through multimodality. The era of visuality has extended to include the analysis of images as a form of language, with visual*

*grammar which is similar to linguistic analysis. Therefore, images can convey messages effectively, adhering to the principle of "seeing is believing." Studies of visuality has massively evolved along the rising popularity of multimodality studies, which is believed to be fair in juxtaposing verbal and pictorial visuals.*

*The visual era has expanded the scope of grammar, which was initially only used for analyzing languages or linguistics, to also serve as a tool for visual studies.*

*According to Kress and van Leeuwen, the 'grammar' of images can be analyzed in a similar manner to language, thus allowing images to be examined based on three metafunctions of multimodal discourse, namely ideational/logical, interpersonal, and textual (Kress, 2006). Implementing these three metafunctions in a visual study may aid in decoding messages, that will ultimately enhance the understanding of the conveyed message.*

*Language and literature are two interconnected concepts, because literature involves all of the written work. With many options of literature works, novel has always been considered as having the longest story compared to other literature works. This considerably lengthy story with a certain complexity usually tries to depict human experience imaginatively. Burgess mentions that this human experience are portrayed through a connected sequence of events which can*

*involve a group of people within a specific setting (Burgess, 2023). Novels are often regarded as merely sources of reading material that can entertain readers, even though many of them have quite heavy or complicated themes. Typically, novels are fictitious and narrative in nature, depicting human life with layered and multiple plots. Since novels are simply literary works, those readers may be regarded as a community of literate people. However, with the advancements in various fields, novels that were once consisted of lengthy verbal texts and devoid of any illustrations can be adapted to comic books and even big screens. Popular, inspiring, and innovative novels quickly become best-selling books and are chosen as ideas for creating films. Classic novels in global literary world, such as Shakespeare's 'Romeo and Juliet', of J.R.R. Tolkien's 'Lord of the Rings' and even the one considered as one classic legacy from the famous Indonesian author, 'Bumi*

*dan Manusia' by Pramoedya suddenly gained sky rocketing popularity as they were adapted into big screens.*

*Novels, which may be perceived as massive bulks of pages and seemed to be dull due to their extensive and dragging narrative text, paradoxically become highly sought after once the story is adapted into a film. The distinct covers of the novels, previously adorned with imaginative illustrations by the cover designer/illustrator, undergo a transformation into glossy photographic works. Generally when a novel's story is successfully adapted into a film, particularly if the film becomes a box-office hit, the popularity of the novel is inevitably affected.*

*Based on the background described above, an idea emerged to analyze the covers of some popular fiction novels, specifically how the visual photography in those covers can be regarded representative of the entire story. Among the numerous types of*

*popular novels, this research will only focus on popular classic novels which have been adapted into films more than once and their new version of covers emerged into photographic forms. The objective of this study is to discover the value of visual representation in the photographic form of the popular fiction novel covers that have been adapted into films. Furthermore, this research aims to explore the relationship between the constructed imagery conveyed by both the verbal text and the visuals that dress up the novel's cover. In doing so, it is hoped that this research may provide a new insight to the worlds of literature (English) and photography.*



Fig. 1. Some popular novels

Source: <https://destinationksa.com/20-novels-that-will-make-you-addicted-to-reading/>)

Kress and van Leeuwen suggested that when there is an overlap of semiotic modes in a text, such as in a novel, it is advisable to employ a multimodality approach in order to unravel the underlying meaning as well as their connection (Kress, 2001). Multimodality is a part of techniques in communication field, since human communication can involve the simultaneous use of multiple modes, such as in speaking while making specific gestures. In brief, communication implicates the exchange of information (Danesi, 2011). This sort of overlapping modes occurs on the cover of a novel, for it serves visual parade of text as in the title and a color photographic work.

Conventionally, the process of communication can extend far beyond its own production, delivery, and distribution of the message. The delivery of the message can be done both directly and indirectly with the abetment of technology. According to Danesi, human communication can be considered unique because it may involve the use of more than one mode or medium, thus human communication is multimodal (Danesi, 2011). Using multimodality as an approach in discerning what meaning lies underneath the visual itself will help finding what visual it really wants to represent, or even more, not to represent anything at all.

A multimodal approach has been utilized to analyze magazine's covers, focusing on their meaning and concepts, along with the layouts of the cover (Ghaniabadi, 2015). However, he did not specifically concentrate on photography, rather he explored diverse types of images in the cover. While Matteson (2019) tried to scrutinize why photographs adorning novels as their cover, only to find that photography is employed

to merely improve the appearance of printed novels in order to compete with vastly accessible e-books. Based on his investigation, most publishing houses implemented this strategy for being time-wise and spending less budget. Thus, they favor the photographs from getty images. Another research about photographs in novels' cover was conducted by Baetens. Yet, he emphasized on the peritextual difference between printed materials called as 'photographic books' and 'photographs in books' (Baetens, 2005). Based on some researches found prior to writing this paper, it is noticed that a study on the photographic visual representation in popular novels' covers have not come into light.

#### *Photography*

A photo gets transformed into a tool to persuade readers and viewers in order to make it an independent subject for interpretation. A long and dragging sequence of phrases that are generally used for description can be replaced by a single image that may represent a great amount of visual information

down to the smallest detail. In this way, a picture might fill in the gaps left by a series of insufficiently descriptive words while attempting to articulate an event (Rose, 2007).

Photography is a documentation of events in a two-dimensional medium. Documentary photography is believed to be able to deliver authenticity and absolute truth. The inherent nature of photography, that serves to capture and document something, declares to what is conventionally known as documentary photography (Soedjono, 2006). Therefore, a documentary photograph formulates the value of essentiality in a photography, that people easily fall to believe its authenticity. Furthermore, an artistic approach in understanding the photograph while trying to find its objectives and reasons, or the manipulation or contextualization of the photographer, may improve the trust level from the audience (Edwards, 2006).

#### *Novel*

A novel is a literary work that contains both intrinsic and extrinsic

elements. The content of a novel is usually extensive and more complicated than that of a poem, and it does not have the structural limits as a poem does. Commonly, a novel depicts, illustrates, and represents various aspects of human life involving relationships with other people or their environment.

According to Burgess, a novel is a narrative prose with its own complexity in terms of characterization. The characters are generally interconnected with each other in a series of events in a certain location or setting (Burgess, 2023).

#### Multimodal

Multimodality is a concept used to describe how people interact by using multiple semiotic modes at the same time (Kress, 2001)(Kress, 2006). Furthermore, Kress and van Leeuwen point out that semiotic types of communication involve visual, verbal, written text, gesture, and even music. In addition to that, they mention that color may transmit numerous meanings and serve as one of the semiotic modes (Kress, 2001). According to Kress and van Leeuwen, multimodal

analysis can be implemented using three metafunctions: ideational/logical, interpersonal, and textual (Kress, 2001). Ideational/logical as the first metafunction will set an image as a representation of an empirical experience. Then, the second metafunction, interpersonal can be utilized to examine the relationship or the interdependence of the present semiotic modes. Textual, as the third metafunction, will analyze the structure of the text (both visual and verbal) to find the meaning carried within.

#### Visual Representation

In simple terms, representation refers to the perception of ordinary people towards certain events, or symbols. Generally speaking, representation refers to the interpretation of (depicted) particular event or object (Hall, 1997). In conjunction with that, Barker specifies representation as the construction of all forms of media, especially mass media (Barker, 2005). Thus, it may encompass various aspects of reality, including object, events, and cultural identity.

*Such representation may exist in a manifestation, emanating in the form of words or writing, as well as moving images.*

## *2. Methods*

*This research combined a descriptive and interpretive method using a visual methodology approach. Qualitative research can preferably defined as an extensive study that derives from a simultaneous and inseparable production and comprehension of the object being researched and researcher (Endraswara, 2003).*

*The comprehensive nature of qualitative method requires a thorough consideration of every piece of evidence needed for the analysis. A qualitative method of the study is one in which the analysis is also qualitative (Alasuutari, 1995). Even though numerical representation and identification of variables were not entirely ruled out, there were chances of labelling the variables. Pieces of information which were obtained could be analyzed as an entity because a qualitative analysis requires a cohesion that may differ from a statistical research. The*

*descriptive method was chosen for its modesty since the were sets of complexity of study on the verbal language and the visual one. Thus, an inductive analysis was conducted to expand and clarify the findings and extract the data obtained using grounded theory (Moleong, 2018). Random samples of the research were selected from films which were already adapted from classic novels that have gone through some remakes. In doing so, an internet search was utilized as a means of finding information about the films, referring to [www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com) and [www.rottentomatoes.com](http://www.rottentomatoes.com) that are often used as references in watching movies because they provide reliable reviews. To sum up, this research is expected to contribute to the discourse on visual representation of photography that performs as an effective medium for delivering messages by comprising the entire narrative of popular novels which have been adapted to film. In addition, the whole information about the novel is only displayed in one frame of a photograph outlined as the cover.*

### 3. Discussion and Result

*Book cover as in the cover of a novel is the first thing people see when trying to find a book. A novel can be republished with different kinds of covers to attract new readers or buyers and sometimes it is merely to show that the novel has been republished. Book cover is the most communicative and strategic marketing medium, thus a novel which has been adapted into big screen and become a success will publish a new version with a photographic medium or realistic illustration resembling the iconic character or scene of the film.*

*Various visuals appear simultaneously in the display of a novel's cover in the intention of creating a communicative and persuasive value. These visual aspects include context as represented by situations, places, or characters, typography, and dominant colors. Market preferences seem to influence the design of novel covers, resulting in a transition from the author's or publisher former perception to the most demanded or*

*preferred by the market as perhaps observed from the sales figures.*

*Occasionally, people who do not particularly enjoy reading will be easily drawn to a book (novel) because of its cover. Therefore, an old saying of "don't judge a book by its cover" seems relevant to be resonated as the cover might be misleading. A visually interesting cover does not always imply that the content inside it is as compelling as the cover. A subjective reflection concludes that an extravagant cover usually costs a fortune.*

*This research observed some samples of classic novels which have been widely favored and have been adapted to film. Romance is a genre nobody can resist, either in novel or film, not to mention when it intersects with gender issue. Commonly, this gender issue is brought up based on the conventional belief of the patriarchal society. Usually, the story will revolve around a matchmaking amongst certain class of society, or a typical romance between a high-class male with a low-class female. Sometimes the story also features a mature,*



strong, and independent female character.

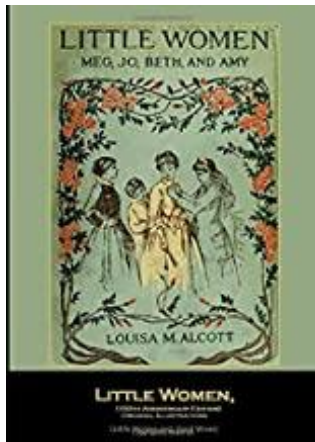


Fig. 2. Novel cover from "Little Women" by Louisa May Alcott (left: original classic version, right: film adaptation of 1994).

([https://www.amazon.com/s?k=little+women+by+louisa&page=3&qid=1605846197&ref=sr\\_pg\\_2](https://www.amazon.com/s?k=little+women+by+louisa&page=3&qid=1605846197&ref=sr_pg_2), retrieved on 25 June 2023).

Two covers above show a very different visual while as a matter of fact they are the same novel, only with a different cover, entitled "Little Women" by Louisa May Alcott who is

an American female author. The story is about March sisters who are brought up in family with a different perspective of love live. Those sisters are not the typical hopeless romantic people because they have their own notion of love relationship, as well as of civil matter (familyhood), and pursuit of career. Alcott is a prominent novelist from America's 18<sup>th</sup> Century period, among all of her works, "Little Women" is considered as one of her masterpieces. The novel with aforementioned title has been adapted into film seventh times with a time span from 1917-2020 (Pollock, 2023). In 1994, 'Little Women' which was starred by Winona Ryder as Jo, the lead character, received several awards and a few years ago in 2019 a remake was made, starring Saoirse Ronan as Jo (Spencer,2019).



Fig. 3. Novels' cover of "Little Women" by Louisa May Alcott with photographic visual (left: regular version, right: movie companion version).

([https://www.amazon.com/s?k=little+women+from+movie+adaptation&ref=nb\\_sb\\_noss](https://www.amazon.com/s?k=little+women+from+movie+adaptation&ref=nb_sb_noss), retrieved on 15<sup>th</sup> June 2023).

If America has Louisa May Alcott with her 'Little Women', England has 'Pride and Prejudice' by Jane Austen with a similar theme. Austen and Alcott come from different country and period of time, yet they portray similar condition of gender issue, a theme of eternal reflection of the society that will never go stale. Akin to 'Little Women', Austen's 'Pride and Prejudice' offers the story of women's independence that was considered taboo a long time ago. Since 1938,

the novel of 'Pride and Prejudice' has been adapted to film for more than 17 times, not to mention there was a television series with the same adaptation (Catherine, 2018). Among many versions, the one made in 2005 starring Keira Knightley as Elizabeth was considered a heartthrob.



Fig.4. Novel's cover "Pride and Prejudice" (version of 2005 remake). (<https://sites.google.com/site/prideandprejudiceblockhbl/>, retrieved on 17 July 2023).

The visual representation of photography on the most recent novels' cover makes the classic novels that once was considered 'outdated' look interesting and have a sense of 'newness'. Thus, the classic novels gain more attention from people going to bookstore. Based on an

*interview with some English Literature students from a private university in Yogyakarta, they like the new version of the classic novels' cover because they look very modern. There were 9 students out of 12 students preferred the new version of the novel, while the rest 3 students preferred the 'outdated' or original version of illustration because they value the originality. These 3 students had their own reasons for having such a preference, that they had had known classic novels before they became college students. When those 9 students were asked whether modern version also means photographic visual in the cover, adapting from a certain scene from a movie, they mentioned that the photographic visual is definitely more noticeable and impressive. An iconic scene or an iconic character from a movie is easily perceived and remembered by a lot of people.*

*The visual representation is the photographic visual in the cover of the novels which is perceived by common people towards certain intention, such as for book shopping spree, finding book for school*

*project, or enjoying a leisure time. The interpretation of someone towards the novel (based on the cover someone sees) may emerge a construction of particular meaning, depending on the knowledge and the culture someone has (Hall, 1997). The photographic visual on the cover portray the resemble reality, emanated in the form of still life picture adorning the front part of the novel as to lure the readers.*

*In trying to represent the new visual alike to the former one, the above novels employ the similar or the exact type of typography that can be easily recognized as being identical. In one frame of a cover, the entire story of the novel is elaborated thoughtfully in order to show the readers what the novel is about. Multimodality is appropriated to shape a certain contextual visual representation, about the novel itself, as it has been adapted into a film. The modes are in the color tone, typography, layout, the title of the novel in the written form and the color photographs. Many different elements, as in symbols, are consolidated to create the most*

appropriate visual representation. Since representation is the concept about occurrences or certain symbols, a new meaning will emerge upon perceiving the visual, in this context is the novel's cover.

#### 4. Conclusion

Creating a value of beautiful reality seem to be effectively attract people's attention. Judging a book by its cover may help the reader to love and buy the book, or to feel indifferent and forget the book. To sum up, a design of a cover for books/novels is very crucial to plan carefully. The aesthetics value will spark itself once the design is set properly. Photography as the medium for depicting reality brings up the sense of closeness and resemblance. The visuality becomes something familiar, the more familiar it is to our reality, the more we want to know more. Deciding which photograph to display as the element of the cover might not be easy, but the grand design for promoting the movie and the book, with one or the most prominent event from the story, can help the lay out find the the right photographic visuals.

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