

# The Meaning of Justice from a Mass Communication Perspective in the Film Keadilan (2025)

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## **Abstract.**

*This study examines the meaning of justice constructed in the film Keadilan (The Verdict, 2025) directed by Lee Chang-hee and Yusron Fuadi through a mass communication perspective using Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding theory. This Indonesian–South Korean collaboration consistently raises critiques of the legal system, class-based impunity, and institutional failures of the judiciary. The study employs a qualitative-interpretive textual analysis method. The analysis reveals that the film encodes three layered dimensions of justice: (1) procedural justice as an object of critique, where formal legal systems are portrayed as mechanisms vulnerable to manipulation by power and capital; (2) distributive justice as an ideological substructure affirming that access to legal protection follows lines of socioeconomic inequality; and (3) restorative justice as deliberate ambiguity, inviting audiences to reflect on the boundary between justice and revenge. Through narrative, character construction, mise-en-scène, cinematography, and dialogue, the film positions itself in an encoding stance of strategic subversive complicity using popular genre forms as vehicles for substantial social critique. These findings affirm the relevance of Hall's theory in dissecting film texts as arenas of ideological meaning contestation, particularly within the context of legal and justice representation in Indonesia.*

**Keywords:** *Meaning of justice; Encoding/decoding; Stuart Hall; Mass communication; Keadilan film (2025) and Legal representation.*

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## **I. INTRODUCTION**

Film, as a mass communication medium, has a tremendous capacity to construct social meaning and shape public perception of reality. From a contemporary mass communication perspective, film serves not only as entertainment but also as a cultural text containing complex ideological messages, including representations of justice, law, and power relations. (McQuail, 2010)

The film Keadilan (The Verdict, 2025) emerged as a cinematic phenomenon that attracted widespread attention from the Indonesian public. As a collaborative work between Indonesia and South Korea, directed by Lee Chang-hee and Yusron Fuadi, this film raises the issue of legal injustice that is highly contextual to the contemporary socio-political situation in Indonesia. The film was produced by MD Pictures in collaboration with Innikor Pictures and Showbox, starring Rio Dewanto, Reza Rahadian, Niken Anjani, and Elang El Gibran, and premiered in theaters on November 20, 2025, before arriving on Netflix on March 26, 2026.

The significance of this research lies in the film's thematic relevance to the problematic legal justice issues that have become public issues in Indonesia. Cases of class-based impunity, manipulation of legal procedures by the authorities, and the failure of judicial institutions to achieve substantive justice are recurring phenomena in the Indonesian legal landscape. The film Keadilan (Justice) elevates these themes into a cinematic format that is widely accessible to the public, making it a significant object of study in mass communication studies.

This research uses the encoding/decoding theory. (Hall, 1980) as the primary analytical framework. Hall asserts that media texts are not neutral and transparent containers of meaning, but rather constructs that reflect the particular ideological positions of the encoder (Hall, 1980). Thus, an analysis of encoding in the film Keadilan allows for a deeper understanding of how the meaning of justice is constructed and disseminated through the medium of film.

Based on the description above, this study aims to: (1) identify and analyze how the meaning of justice is encoded in the film Keadilan (2025) through various cinematic elements; (2) map the types of meaning of justice that are constructed; and (3) understand the ideological position of the filmmaker in relation to the discourse of contemporary justice in Indonesia.

## II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### 2.1 Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding Theory

Stuart Hall developed the encoding/decoding model as a critique of linear communication theory, which views the communication process as the direct transmission of messages from sender to receiver. In his essay, (Hall, 1980), argues that media texts are produced through an encoding process in which message creators internalize social, ideological, and professional codes into the text. This process is always mediated by prevailing relations of production, knowledge frameworks, and technical infrastructures. (Hall, 1980).

Hall identified three possible decoding positions that the audience may take: (1) the dominant/hegemonic position, where the audience decodes the message according to the dominant code; (2) the negotiated position, where the audience accepts part of the message but makes modifications; and (3) the oppositional position, where the audience rejects the dominant code and decodes in a contradictory way. (Hall, 1980). In this study, the focus of analysis is on the encoding side—how filmmakers construct the meaning of justice into cinematic texts. (Hall, 1997)

### 2.2 Stuart Hall's Representation Theory

(Hall, 1997) argues that representation is the production of meaning through language—language in the broad sense encompassing all sign systems, including images, sounds, and cinematic narratives. Representation is not a mirror of reality, but rather an active construction that reflects and reproduces power relations. (Hall, 1997) In the context of film, the representation of characters and institutions, particularly the legal system, is an arena in which contested ideologies are articulated. (Hall, 1997). In line with this, recent studies show that film is also a medium for representing complex social issues such as gender-based violence, where visual symbols and narratives are used to shape public perception. (SATRIA WIJAYA DEWA SAPUTRA et al., 2025)

### 2.3 Film as a Mass Communication Text

In mass communication studies, film is understood as a medium that has a unique capacity to shape the public agenda and construct social reality. (McQuail, 2010) identify the functions of mass communication, which include information, correlation, continuity, entertainment, and mobilization. Films perform all of these functions simultaneously. (Vivian, 1998) emphasizes that the film industry is an integral part of the mass media system that is capable of framing social issues and influencing public opinion widely.

## III. RESEARCH METHODS

This research uses a qualitative-interpretive approach with a media text analysis method. This approach was chosen because it is appropriate for the research objectives, which focus on an in-depth understanding of the construction of meaning in cinematic texts. (Creswell, 2014).

The object of the research is the film *Keadilan (The Verdict)*, (2025). Data were collected through four techniques: (1) systematic observation of the film's visual and auditory elements; (2) narrative analysis of plot structure and character development; (3) *mise-en-scène* analysis which includes lighting, image composition, and spatial layout; and (4) dialogue and intertextuality analysis.

The analytical framework refers to the model (Hall, 1980) and representation theory (Hall, 1997) The analysis is conducted in layers: from the textual level (what is shown), to the subtextual level (encoded meaning), and intertextual (the relationship of the text to the broader social context). The validity of the analysis is guaranteed through triangulation of data sources from various critical reviews, director's statements, and audience reception data.

## IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1 The Filmmaker's Position as Encoder

Within the theoretical framework (Hall, 1980), this analysis positions the director and scriptwriter as encoders who produce media texts with a structured set of meanings. Encoding of meaning in the film *Keadilan* occurs through four main dimensions: (1) narrative and plot, (2) characters and conflict, (3) *mise-en-scène* and cinematography, and (4) dialogue and intertextuality.

Director Yusron Fuadi explicitly stated that the theme of this film is very relevant to the contemporary situation in Indonesia and is a global phenomenon. (Jumali, 2025) This statement strengthens the argument that the encoding is intentional—the filmmaker consciously internalizes social discourse about legal injustice into the narrative and visual structure. This is where the media text becomes not simply a reflection of reality, but an active construction of meaning.

## 4.2 Encoding through Narrative and Plot

### 4.2.1 Three-Act Narrative Structure as an Ideological Framework



**Fig. 4.21** Raka is a security officer who witnesses the law being manipulated.

The narrative of the film *Keadilan* follows a three-act dramatic structure ideologically critical of the legal system. In the first act (setup), the audience is introduced to Raka as an idealistic and honest court security officer, a social subject representing a subaltern position in the power hierarchy. Raka witnesses daily how the law is manipulated by power and money, an exposition that directly encodes the structural conditions of injustice as a normative backdrop.



**Fig. 4.22** In this picture, Raka's wife, Nina, a young pregnant lawyer, is the victim of brutal violence from Dika.

In the second act (confrontation), the encoding shifts to a personal level when Raka's wife, Nina, a young, pregnant lawyer, becomes the victim of brutal violence by Dika, the son of a conglomerate, who is protected by a cunning lawyer named Timo. More than 70 percent of the scenes are shot in the courtroom, creating a dense and suffocating atmosphere. (Haryono, 2026). The choice of this dominant location is not merely an artistic decision, but an ideological statement: the courtroom, which should be the most sacred institution of justice, has instead become an arena for the manipulation and performance of power.



**Fig. 4.23** Raka took over the trial with a gun in his hand.

The third act (resolution) sees Raka take an extreme decision: taking over the trial with a gun, turning the courtroom into a hostage-taking stage. (Haryono, 2026). In Hall's perspective, this ending encodes a strategic moral ambiguity—not a triumph of the system, nor an individual triumph, but rather an open question: where is the line between legitimate justice and justice seized by force?

### 4.2.2 Plot Twist as a Tool for Deconstructing Legal Certainty

This film presents a series of plot twists that repeatedly provoke an emotional response from the audience. (Asnurida, 2025) In narratological analysis, plot twists are rhetorical mechanisms that shake the audience's assumptions about truth and certainty. Each plot twist reinforces the message that in a corrupt legal system, truth is not a stable entity, but rather something that is constantly contested and constructed, in line with Hall's concept of meaning as a product of power relations.

## 4.3 Encoding through Characters and Conflict

### **4.3.1 Character Construction as a Representation of Ideological Position**

Representation theory (Hall, 1997), emphasizes that characters in media texts represent certain ideological positions within social formations. In the film *Keadilan*, there are three character positions, each of which encodes a different perspective on justice.

*First* Raka (Rio Dewanto) is constructed as a representation of ordinary people who are structurally oppressed by the legal system. As a security officer—not a judge, not a prosecutor—Raka represents a subject on the margins of the legal system, while also being the most honest witness to its failure. Second, Timo (Reza Rahadian) is constructed as a complex antagonist, not a stereotypical villain, but rather a representation of the rationality of the system that legitimizes injustice. (MD Entertainment, 2025) The filmmakers' encoding is highly sophisticated: Timo doesn't break the law; he manipulates it into a direct critique of the procedural loopholes in the justice system. Third, Dika (Elang El Gibran) encodes the phenomenon of class-privileged impunity: the son of a conglomerate who enjoys legal protection due to his family's wealth.

### **4.3.2 Conflict as a Manifestation of Conflicting Conceptions of Justice**

The film's central conflict structurally encodes the opposition between three conceptions of justice. Procedural justice is represented by a court system that formally operates according to procedure, yet substantially produces injustice. Distributive justice is presented through the sharp contrast between Dika and Raka's socioeconomic positions, emphasizing the unequal distribution of legal protection. Restorative justice is implicit in Raka's extreme actions, an attempt to restore the shattered moral balance, albeit through unlawful means.

## **4.4 Encoding through Mise-en-Scène and Cinematography**

### **4.4.1 Courtroom as Visual Text**

The decision to shoot more than 70 percent of the scenes in the courtroom (Haryono, 2026) This is a cinematic strategy that directly encodes the film's ideological argument: that legal institutions are at the center of the problem, not merely its backdrop. The use of close-ups in a dark courtroom with moody neon lighting creates a tense atmosphere. (Farizzal, 2025). The aesthetic choice of low-key lighting and a predominance of dark colors is not a neutral decision: in the cinematic tradition of noir and legal thrillers, dark lighting conventionally encodes moral corruption and ambiguity hidden behind institutional facades.

### **4.4.2 Korean Cinematography as a Critical Register**

The collaboration with a South Korean cinematographer through the production house Showbox brings a specific visual register. The fast-paced editing rhythm and controlled tension are a technique for mobilizing the audience's affective power, allowing viewers to not only cognitively understand but also emotionally feel the injustice presented. (Ajie, 2025) The film's atmosphere has even been compared to a "legal version of *Squid Game*." (Farizzal, 2025), a comparison that indicates the successful transfer of the social critical sensibility of the Korean thriller genre into the Indonesian legal context.

### **4.4.3 Musical Arrangement as Affective Encoding**

The musical aspect is a crucial component of encoding. The film closes with Sal Priadi's "I'd Like to Watch You Sleeping," a choice that is considered both apt and emotionally charged. (Ajie, 2025) The selection of independent Indonesian musicians with melancholic and introspective lyrics extends the film's resonance to the realm of contemporary Indonesian pop culture. The film's score is described as elegant, minimalist, yet precise, conveying a chilling, serious, and gripping tension. The music, which is not overdone, instead allows the audience to feel the moral weight of each scene. This aligns with the finding that a semiotic analysis of song lyrics in Korean popular culture can reveal layers of deep emotional meaning as a form of cross-cultural mass communication. (Kusuma et al., 2025)

## **4.5 Encoding through Dialogue and Intertextuality**

### **4.5.1 Dialogue as an Arena for Contesting Meaning**

The dialogue in the film *Keadilan* functions as an explicit arena for contesting meaning. The conflict between Timo's formal-procedural legal arguments and Raka's substantial-emotional moral demands presents two clashing discourses of justice. From Hall's perspective, dialogue is a site where conflicting ideologies are articulated and confronted.



**Fig. 4.51** *Saddam's trial—where Timo used the pretext that Saddam had schizophrenia to get him acquitted.*

The opening scene of Saddam's trial where Timo uses the excuse that Saddam has schizophrenia to acquit him of all charges. (Indonesian Wikipedia, 2025), is a powerful example of dialogic encoding. Legal language is used here not as a tool for seeking truth, but as a tool for manipulating truth—a direct critique of the legal system's vulnerability to distortion by knowledgeable and resourceful actors.

#### **4.5.2 Intertextuality and Indonesian Social Context**

The intertextual dimension of the film *Keadilan* is very rich. The director stated that the film's theme is very relevant to the current situation. (Jumali, 2025), inviting intertextual reading that connects fictional narratives with various real-life cases in Indonesia. The collaboration with Korean screenwriter Yoon Hyun-ho presents a narrative sensibility that is typical of Korean cinema, where critiques of class inequality and institutional corruption are very familiar, as in Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite* (2019). (Bong, 2019) This intertextuality enriches the encoding with layers of cross-cultural meaning: Raka's question of justice is not just an Indonesian issue, but a universal symptom of advanced capitalism that allows money to buy justice.

### **4.6 Mapping of Encoded Justice Meaning Types**

#### **4.6.1 Procedural Justice: What Comes as Criticism**

The film *Keadilan* predominantly encodes procedural justice in a critical position, not as a championed ideal, but as a failed institution. Formal legal procedures are portrayed as mechanisms that can be hijacked by power and capital. The presence of false witnesses, the manipulation of evidence, and Timo's use of procedural loopholes directly encode the argument that procedural justice without substantive integrity is a tool of oppression, not protection.

#### **4.6.2 Distributive Justice: The Hidden Substructure**

Distributive justice becomes the ideological substructure that underpins the entire narrative. The disparity between the socio-economic positions of Dika and Raka—conglomerates versus security guards—visually and narratively emphasizes that the distribution of legal protection follows the lines of economic inequality. In Hall's framework, this constitutes a dominant encoding that invites the audience to decode the film through the lens of class consciousness: justice is a luxury item accessible only to those with resources. (Rawls, 1971).

#### **4.6.3 Restorative Justice: Intentional Ambiguity**

The most complex encoding lies in the ambiguity of the restorative resolution. Raka's act of taking over the trial with a gun is a deliberately problematic encoding of restorative justice. The film doesn't provide easy answers, but instead raises a moral question: who deserves to be called a victim? This ambiguity is a sophisticated encoding strategy; the filmmakers reject a simple preferred reading and instead invite the audience to reflect on the boundaries between justice and revenge, between law and morality.

### **4.7 Dominant Encoding Position: A Critical Analysis**

With reference to trichotomy (Hall, 1980), dominant/hegemonic code, negotiated code, and oppositional code it can be argued that the encoding carried out by the filmmakers of *Keadilan* is in a unique position: using hegemonic codes (mainstream legal thriller genre, big production, popular stars) as a vehicle to convey meaning that is actually in an oppositional register against class domination and institutional corruption.

This is a strategy that in cultural studies is called subversive complexity, the use of popular forms to spread social criticism that has the potential to shake things up. (Fiske, 1989). The film *Keadilan* is not just entertainment; it shakes and invites its audience to reflect: where does justice stand when the system favors those in power? (Ajie, 2025) The film's success, both commercially and in provoking public discussion, can be read as an indication that the encoded meanings successfully resonated with the lived experiences of

Indonesian audiences. (Sobur, 2013) A similar phenomenon is also seen in other studies of representations of Korean popular culture, where media content such as song lyrics is used as a medium to convey the meaning of identity and psychosocial crises to young audiences. (Wulandari et al., 2026)

## V. CONCLUSION

This research has shown that the film *Keadilan* (2025) encodes the meaning of justice in a multi-layered manner through various cinematic elements. Using Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding theoretical framework, three main findings can be formulated.

*First* This film positions itself in a subversive encoding position, employing the popular entertainment genre as a vehicle for substantial social critique of the Indonesian legal system. The narrative, characters, mise-en-scène, and dialogue collectively form a text that consistently questions the legitimacy of procedural justice without substantive integrity.

*Second* This film encodes three interrelated dimensions of justice: procedural justice as the object of critique, distributive justice as the ideological substructure, and restorative justice as deliberate ambiguity. These three dimensions are presented simultaneously, creating a narrative complexity that invites critical reflection from the audience.

*Third*, the Indonesian–South Korean collaboration produces a rich intertextuality, in which Korean cinema's socially critical sensibility towards class inequality and institutional corruption is successfully transposed into the specific Indonesian socio-legal context.

Theoretically, these findings reinforce the relevance of Hall's theory in analyzing cinematic texts as arenas for contestation of ideological meaning. Practically, this study provides an understanding of how film as a mass communication medium can function as an instrument for informal legal education and the formation of critical public awareness. Future research is recommended to complement this encoding analysis with empirical decoding studies on how actual audiences decode the meaning of justice, including the possibility of negotiated or oppositional readings among various audience segments.

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