

Exhuma: Spiritual Semiosis and Ritual Logic in the Final Sequence

Devanka Diaz Ayu Pitaloka^{*1}, Budi Setiyono², Aris Setiawan³

^{1,2,3}Institut Seni Indonesia Surakarta, Surakarta, Indonesia.

*Corresponding Author: devankapitaloka@std.isi-ska.ac.id

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 25 December 2025

Revised 16 March 2026

Accepted 25 March 2026

Available online 30 April 2026

E-ISSN: [2654-3591](#)

P-ISSN: [2623-1999](#)

How to cite:

Pitaloka, D. D. A., Setiyono, B., & Setiawan, A. (2026). Exhuma: Spiritual semiosis and ritual logic in the final sequence. *International Journal of Culture and Art Studies*, 10(1), 040–055.

ABSTRACT

While film semiotics has extensively examined narrative structure, genre conventions, and audience affect, it has paid limited attention to how spiritual meaning is structurally produced within specific cinematic sequences in Asian horror cinema. This study addresses this gap by analyzing the final ritual sequence of *Exhuma* (2024) to examine how spiritual semiosis is constructed through the relational organization of signs rooted in East Asian cosmology. Employing a qualitative semiotic and intertextual approach, the study operationalizes Roland Barthes' framework of denotation, connotation, and myth alongside Julia Kristeva's concept of intertextuality to trace how ritual signs generate cosmological meaning. The final sequence is selected as a bounded unit of analysis for its narrative and spiritual culmination, which concentrates the densest configuration of elemental symbolism, bodily enactment, and verbal articulation. The findings demonstrate that the sequence is structured as a coherent ritual process consisting of cognitive recognition of elemental composition, verbal articulation of cosmological principles, and embodied enactment. At the mythic level, this configuration naturalizes a worldview in which spiritual disturbance is resolved through relational balance among elemental forces, corresponding to the operative logic of Wu Xing. Rather than making empirical claims about audience reception, this study proposes an analytical reading grounded in structural cosmological affinity, through which the film's spiritual logic may be interpreted across cultural contexts. By integrating semiotics and intertextuality within a cosmological framework, the study contributes a model for understanding Asian horror cinema as a site of spiritual semiosis articulated through cinematic form.

Keywords: *Film semiotics, Spiritual semiosis, Korean horror cinema, Ritual logic, Intertextuality*



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International.

<http://doi.org/10.32734/ijcas.v10i1.24219>

1. Introduction

Asian horror cinema has increasingly become a significant field of inquiry within global film studies, not only for its distinctive aesthetic strategies but also for its complex negotiation of culture, belief systems, and modernity. Scholars have noted that horror films in East and Southeast Asia frequently depart from Western horror conventions by foregrounding spiritual cosmologies, ancestral memory, and ritual practices as central narrative forces rather than mere atmospheric devices (Bordwell, 2008; Carroll, 1990; Cousins, 2011). This orientation positions Asian horror cinema as a cultural site where metaphysical anxieties, historical consciousness, and social transformation intersect through visual form.

Within this scholarly landscape, a substantial body of research has examined Asian horror through the lenses of genre theory, narrative structure, and audience affect. Studies commonly emphasize fear as an emotional response, the uncanny as a narrative mechanism, and monstrosity as a metaphor for social crisis (Bordwell, 2008; Bordwell & Thompson, 2013; Carroll, 1990). While these approaches have contributed valuable insights into how horror operates as a cinematic genre, they tend to privilege psychological and narrative dimensions over the cosmological and spiritual frameworks that inform many Asian horror narratives.

In parallel with these discussions, cultural theorists argue that film functions not only as entertainment but also as a repository of symbolic knowledge that encodes worldviews, ethical systems, and collective memory

(Hall, 1997; Hutcheon, 2006). From this perspective, cinematic images do not merely represent reality but actively construct systems of meaning through signs, symbols, and narrative conventions. In the context of Asian horror cinema, while several studies have addressed shamanism, geomancy, and ritual practices in Asian horror cinema, these discussions often remain at the level of thematic or cultural representation. This study shifts the focus toward how such ritual scenes function as structured semiotic configurations within specific cinematic sequences.

Indonesian scholars have similarly emphasized that visual culture, including film, operates as a site where cultural values and spiritual concepts are articulated and negotiated. Sumardjo (2000) and Ratna (2010) contend that artistic texts in Indonesian contexts often embed philosophical and cosmological ideas within symbolic forms, requiring interpretive frameworks that move beyond surface-level description (Ratna, 2010; Sumardjo, 2000). Ahimsa-Putra (2012) further highlights that cultural products in Asia frequently draw upon indigenous systems of knowledge that organize relationships between humans, nature, and the unseen world (Ahimsa-Putra, 2012). These perspectives reinforce the necessity of analytical approaches capable of addressing the symbolic and cosmological dimensions of filmic texts.

Taken together, these scholarly positions indicate a growing recognition that Asian horror cinema cannot be fully understood through genre-based or affect-oriented analysis alone. There is a need for interpretive models that can account for how spiritual and cosmological meanings are constructed through cinematic signs and narrative structures. This theoretical orientation provides an essential foundation for examining specific films as sites of spiritual semiosis, where visual elements, ritual actions, and bodily practices function as interconnected sign systems.

Within the broader landscape of Asian horror cinema, South Korean film has emerged as one of the most dynamic sites for negotiating spirituality, historical memory, and modern subjectivity. Korean cinema is widely recognized for its capacity to weave genre storytelling with reflections on national trauma, social change, and cultural identity (Kim, 2011; Mitchell, 2018). Horror, in this context, often operates not merely as a vehicle for fear, but as a mode of cultural expression through which unresolved tensions between tradition and modernity are articulated.

Several scholars observe that contemporary Korean horror films frequently integrate shamanistic practices, geomantic beliefs, and ancestral cosmology into their narratives, presenting ritual as a meaningful response to metaphysical disturbance rather than as a vestigial cultural relic (Choi, 2010; Paquet, 2009). Such representations suggest that spiritual traditions continue to function as living epistemologies within Korean society, even as they are reframed through modern cinematic language. Consequently, Korean horror cinema offers a fertile ground for examining how cosmological systems are translated into visual form.

Exhuma (2024), directed by Jang Jae-hyun, exemplifies this tendency by explicitly engaging with geomancy, exorcism, and ancestral disturbance as central narrative concerns. The film follows a group of ritual specialists who confront a malignant presence tied to improper burial and disrupted spiritual order. Rather than relying solely on jump scares or grotesque imagery, *Exhuma* foregrounds ritual procedures, bodily endurance, and symbolic objects as key components of its horror aesthetics. This narrative orientation positions the film closer to a cosmological drama than to a conventional supernatural thriller.

Emerging studies on *Exhuma* tend to approach the film through the lenses of cultural representation and moral values. Sulistiawati and Mujani (2024), for instance, argue that the film reflects Korean cultural identity through its depiction of ancestral respect, spiritual responsibility, and ethical accountability (Sulistiawati & Mujani, 2024). While such studies illuminate the sociocultural dimensions of the film, they primarily operate at the level of thematic interpretation and character analysis. Less attention has been given to how meaning is generated through the internal structure of signs within specific sequences, particularly in relation to cosmological logic.

From a film-theoretical standpoint, Bordwell (2008) emphasizes that narrative meaning is produced not only through story content but also through patterned relations among visual and auditory elements (Bordwell, 2008). Applying this insight to *Exhuma* suggests that its ritual scenes should be examined as organized systems of signs rather than as illustrative backdrops. The film's final sequence, in particular, concentrates a dense constellation of visual symbols, bodily actions, and verbal articulations that collectively resolve both narrative and spiritual conflict.

This concentration of symbolic activity at the level of visual structure indicates that *Exhuma* presents a cinematic configuration of cosmological reasoning. While previous scholarship has offered valuable thematic and symbolic readings of ritual and spiritual motifs in Asian horror cinema, relatively limited attention has been given to how such configurations operate semiotically at the level of relational sign organization within specific sequences.

Although scholarship on Asian horror cinema and Korean film has expanded significantly over the past two decades, much of this work remains focused on genre classification, narrative themes, and sociocultural representation. Studies commonly address horror as an expression of collective trauma, social anxiety, or cultural identity, emphasizing what films depict rather than how meaning is structurally produced through cinematic signs (Choi, 2010; Kim, 2011; Mitchell, 2018). As a result, the semiotic organization of ritual, objects, and bodily actions within specific sequences often receives limited analytical attention.

In semiotic film studies, Barthes argues that visual texts operate through layered systems of signification, encompassing denotation, connotation, and myth as culturally naturalized meaning (Barthes, 1977, 1983). However, relatively few studies have systematically applied this model to Asian horror films to examine how spiritual meaning is constructed at the level of visual structure. Existing analyses tend to acknowledge symbolism in the abstract, without tracing how signs interact relationally to form coherent cosmological logics.

Similarly, while Kristeva's concept of intertextuality has been widely employed in literary and cultural studies, its application to horror cinema in Asian contexts remains limited. Intertextuality is often understood narrowly as reference or quotation, rather than as a network of cultural discourses that shape meaning across texts and traditions (Kristeva, 1980). Consequently, the possibility that a single filmic sequence may activate multiple cosmological frameworks through structural affinity has not been sufficiently explored.

Indonesian film and cultural scholars have long emphasized that artistic texts in Southeast Asia frequently encode philosophical and cosmological concepts through symbolic forms (Ahimsa-Putra, 2012; Ratna, 2010; Sumardjo, 2000). These scholars argue that meaning emerges through relational patterns among signs rather than through isolated symbols. Despite this insight, few studies have brought Indonesian theoretical perspectives into dialogue with analyses of East Asian cinema, particularly in relation to spiritual and cosmological signification.

This situation reveals a twofold gap. First, there is a lack of research that examines Asian horror films as systems of spiritual semiosis, where ritual actions, bodily gestures, and material objects function as interrelated signs within a cosmological framework. Second, there is limited scholarship that approaches such films from a cross-regional Asian perspective, exploring how cosmological logics rooted in East Asian traditions may be intelligible within Southeast Asian interpretive horizons. Addressing these gaps requires an analytical approach that moves beyond thematic representation toward the examination of sign structures and intertextual relations. Such an approach enables the investigation of how cinematic form itself becomes a medium for cosmological knowledge. This need provides the conceptual foundation for the present study, which focuses on the final sequence of *Exhuma* as a dense site of spiritual semiosis.

This study adopts a qualitative interpretive approach grounded primarily in Roland Barthes' semiotic theory and Julia Kristeva's concept of intertextuality as its core analytical frameworks. Barthes' model of signification provides a systematic way to examine how visual signs in film operate across the levels of denotation, connotation, and myth, revealing how cultural meanings become naturalized through representation (Barthes, 1977, 1983). Within this framework, cinematic images are understood not as transparent reflections of reality, but as structured sign systems that organize perception and belief.

Kristeva's notion of intertextuality complements this semiotic perspective by conceptualizing texts as sites of relationality, formed through the intersection of multiple discourses and cultural codes (Kristeva, 1980). Rather than treating intertextuality as mere quotation or reference, this study approaches it as a structural condition in which cosmological ideas, ritual logics, and symbolic systems circulate across cultural boundaries. This orientation enables the analysis of *Exhuma* not only as a Korean cultural product, but also as a text that participates in wider Asian cosmological conversations.

Supporting these core frameworks, the study draws on East Asian cosmological thought, particularly the Wu Xing system, as a contextual interpretive lens. Wu Xing conceptualizes reality as a dynamic process constituted by relational interactions among wood, fire, earth, metal, and water, emphasizing balance rather than substance (Kaptchuk, 2000). This system is not introduced as an external explanatory model imposed upon the film, but as a cosmological logic that is already embedded within the narrative and visual organization of *Exhuma*. Its function is therefore contextual and elucidatory rather than foundational.

To extend the intertextual dimension, selected perspectives from Indonesian scholarship on cosmology and symbolic culture are employed as comparative lenses. Scholars such as Sedyawati (2006), Suseno (1993), Sutrisno (2018), and Sumardjo (2000) emphasize that Indonesian cultural traditions conceptualize the universe as a relational system linking humans, nature, and the unseen through symbolic action and ritual practice (Sedyawati, 2006; Sumardjo, 2000; Suseno, 1993; Sutrisno, 2018). These perspectives are not used to claim equivalence between cosmological systems, but to demonstrate structural affinities that enable cross-cultural intelligibility.

By organizing the theoretical framework hierarchically, this study positions semiotics and intertextuality as analytical tools, while cosmological systems function as interpretive contexts. This positioning allows the analysis to remain focused on how meaning is produced through signs, while still acknowledging the cultural knowledge that informs those signs. Consequently, the study approaches the final sequence of *Exhuma* as a site where spiritual meaning emerges from the relational organization of visual elements, bodily actions, and ritual processes.

Based on the theoretical orientation outlined above, this study aims to examine how the final sequence of *Exhuma* constructs spiritual meaning through the relational organization of visual signs and ritual actions. Rather than approaching the film solely as a representation of Korean belief, the study treats the sequence as a semiotic configuration in which cosmological logic is articulated through cinematic form.

This study seeks to contribute to film and cultural studies by proposing spiritual semiosis as an analytical lens for examining Asian horror cinema. This lens foregrounds the production of spiritual meaning through sign structures and intertextual relations, extending existing approaches that primarily emphasize genre, narrative, or cultural representation. By doing so, the study demonstrates how cinematic form itself can function as a medium for articulating and transmitting cosmological knowledge.

Based on this perspective, the study formulates the following main research question: How do the structure of signs and intertextual relations in the final sequence of *Exhuma* construct spiritual semiosis through symbols and ritual rooted in East Asian cosmology, in ways that remain intelligible to audiences from different cultural backgrounds?

2. Methods

This study employs a qualitative interpretive research design oriented toward semiotic and intertextual analysis. The design is appropriate for examining how meaning is constructed through visual signs, ritual actions, and narrative organization within a cinematic text. Rather than measuring variables or testing hypotheses, the study focuses on interpreting relational patterns among signs and explaining how these patterns produce spiritual meaning.

Roland Barthes' semiotic framework is operationalized to examine signs at the levels of denotation, connotation, and myth, while Julia Kristeva's concept of intertextuality is used to trace relational connections between cinematic signs and broader cosmological discourses (Barthes, 1977; Kristeva, 1980). These frameworks function as analytical tools rather than as objects of theoretical exposition. East Asian cosmology, particularly the Wu Xing system, is employed as a contextual interpretive lens for understanding the cosmological logic embedded in the film's ritual representation (Kaptchuk, 2000).

2.1. Unit of Analysis

The primary unit of analysis is the final ritual sequence of *Exhuma* (2024). This sequence is selected because it constitutes the narrative and spiritual resolution of the film and concentrates the densest configuration of ritual actions, bodily gestures, symbolic objects, and verbal articulations. In this climactic confrontation, cosmological logic becomes most explicit through the coordinated interaction of visual and verbal signs.

The final sequence is delimited temporally from the moment Kim Sang-deok articulates the elemental composition of the possessing entity to the moment the ritual action concludes with the destruction of the entity's body. This segment corresponds approximately to the final minutes of the film and is marked narratively by a shift from investigative uncertainty to decisive confrontation and resolution. While earlier ritual stages foreground Hwa-rim's procedural guidance, the climactic phase examined here centers on Kim Sang-deok's recognition and enactment of elemental counterforces. By clearly defining these temporal boundaries, the study treats this segment as a bounded analytical unit within which sign relations and cosmological logic can be examined systematically.

2.2. Data and Data Collection

Data consist of visual and auditory elements contained within the selected sequence, including bodily gestures, facial expressions, movement patterns, symbolic objects, color composition, sound design, and dialogue. Data were collected through repeated close viewing of the film. The first viewing focused on identifying the overall narrative structure and sequence boundaries. The second viewing concentrated on locating recurring visual and auditory elements associated with ritual action. The third and subsequent viewings were dedicated to refining analytical focus and confirming the consistency of identified signs.

During each viewing, screenshots were captured for key shots, and descriptive notes were produced to document visual composition, object placement, bodily orientation, and verbal articulation. Only elements that demonstrate direct involvement in ritual action or contribute to the resolution of the spiritual conflict were

retained as analytical data. This selection criterion ensured that the analysis remained focused on signs relevant to spiritual semiosis rather than on peripheral cinematic details.

2.3. Analytical Procedure

The analysis follows a four-stage interpretive procedure that operates sequentially and cumulatively.

Table 1. Analytical Procedures

Stage	Procedure
Stage 1: Identification of Signs	Visual and verbal elements within the sequence are identified and categorized as potential signs. These include objects, bodily gestures, spoken or internalized dialogue, sound cues, and spatial arrangements that appear to participate in ritual action or spiritual confrontation.
Stage 2: Denotative and Connotative Analysis	Each identified sign is examined at the denotative level to describe what is explicitly shown, and at the connotative level to interpret culturally implied meanings. This stage establishes how signs function individually and how they begin to form patterns of association.
Stage 3: Intertextual Reading	Identified sign patterns are then examined in relation to broader cosmological discourses, particularly the relational logic of Wu Xing. This stage does not seek direct correspondence but traces structural affinities between cinematic sign relations and cosmological principles.
Stage 4: Interpretation of Spiritual Semiosis	Findings from the previous stages are synthesized to explain how the sequence constructs spiritual meaning through the relational organization of signs. At this stage, spiritual semiosis is understood as the process through which ritual, body, and elemental relations generate a coherent cosmological logic within cinematic form.

This step-by-step procedure ensures that interpretation emerges from systematic analysis rather than from intuitive impression.

The researcher is positioned as a cross-cultural interpreter situated within a Southeast Asian cultural horizon. This positionality is treated as an epistemological standpoint that informs sensitivity to cosmological relationality rather than as personal subjectivity. The purpose of acknowledging this position is not to claim cultural equivalence or experiential authority, but to clarify the interpretive lens through which structural affinities between East Asian and Southeast Asian cosmological logics are recognized.

This study is limited to textual analysis of a single film sequence and does not incorporate audience reception data or ethnographic observation. Consequently, claims regarding cross-cultural intelligibility are inferred from structural analysis of signs rather than from empirical audience responses. Additionally, the interpretive nature of semiotic analysis means that findings are not intended for statistical generalization. However, the systematic analytical procedure employed allows the study to offer theoretically grounded and methodologically transparent insights into how spiritual semiosis operates within cinematic form.

3. Result and Discussion

3.1. Structure of the Final Sequence as Ritual Process

The final sequence of *Exhuma* is structured as a coherent ritual process rather than as a chaotic climax of supernatural confrontation. The sequence unfolds from cognitive recognition to verbal articulation of cosmological knowledge, and finally to embodied ritual action. This structure indicates that the film's narrative resolution is achieved not through brute force or technological intervention, but through the proper activation of cosmological principles through ritualized practice.

At the opening of the sequence, Kim Sang-deok arrives at an internal realization concerning the elemental nature of the possessing entity. This realization is presented through internal dialogue rather than spoken interaction, marking a shift from external investigation to cognitive comprehension. The film visually emphasizes this moment through close framing on Kim's face and the isolation of ambient sound, directing

attention to the act of knowing itself. The entity is identified as composed of metal, establishing a material-cosmological basis for understanding its power.



Figure 1. Kim Sang-deok's internal realization regarding the entity as metal.
(Source: *Exhuma* (2024) directed by Jang Jae-hyun)

Following this recognition, Kim further perceives the metal as burning, indicating the simultaneous presence of fire within what can be understood as an elemental imbalance between metal and fire. This second realization introduces a relational understanding of the entity not merely as a supernatural force, but as a material-cosmological configuration governed by interacting elements. Although the possessing entity is historically embodied in the figure of a samurai spirit, the sequence frames this embodiment materially through iron and fire symbolism, reinforcing its alignment with metal and fire within the Wu Xing framework.

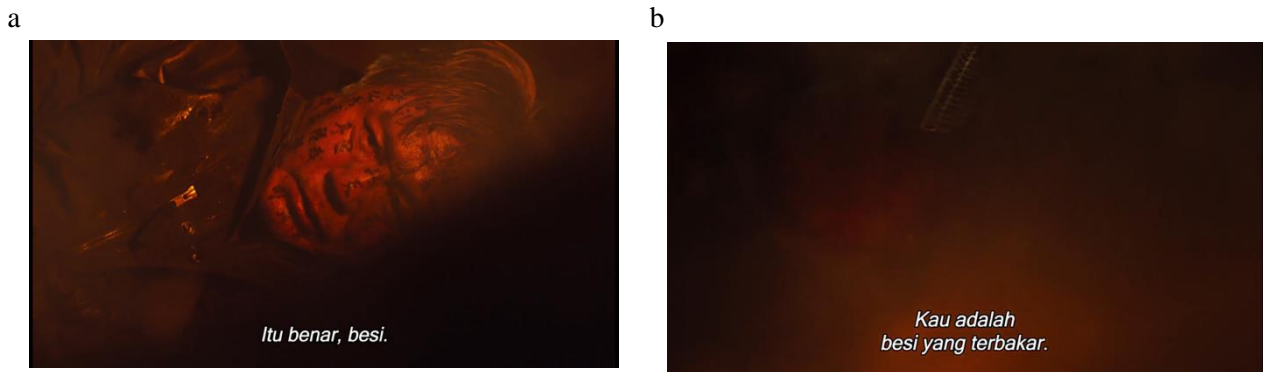


Figure 2. Visual articulation of the entity's elemental configuration as metal in a state of burning (metal-fire imbalance). (a) Subtitle indicating recognition of metal; (b) Subtitle indicating burning metal.
(Source: *Exhuma* (2024) directed by Jang Jae-hyun)

The narrative then transitions from internal cognition to procedural articulation through the character of Hwa-rim, who initiates the application of blood as part of the ritual structure established earlier in the film. Hwa-rim introduces blood as a ritual medium that provokes an immediate reaction from the possessing entity. This shift from knowing to speaking marks an important phase in the ritual process: cosmological knowledge becomes actionable knowledge. The film visually underscores this transition by cutting from Kim's internal monologue to Hwa-rim's spoken instruction, establishing a relay between cognitive and performative domains.



Figure 3. Hwa-rim preparing and applying blood as a ritual medium.
(Source: *Exhuma* (2024) directed by Jang Jae-hyun)

The entity's violent bodily reaction to the blood constitutes the first observable confirmation that the ritual logic is operative. The body becomes the site where cosmological principles manifest visually. This aligns with the view that ritual action functions to materialize abstract cosmological order within embodied practice (Eliade, 1959).

Subsequently, Kim articulates a set of elemental oppositions, notably that water counteracts fire and wood counteracts metal. These statements function not as explanatory exposition for the audience, but as performative utterances that guide the ensuing bodily actions. The repetition of these principles across successive shots reinforces their status as operative rules rather than speculative hypotheses.

a



b



Figure 4. Subtitle displaying Kim Sang-deok's articulation of elemental oppositions. (a) Showing dialogue of "Water overcomes fire"; (b) Showing dialogue "Wood overcomes metal".

(Source: *Exhuma* (2024) directed by Jang Jae-hyun)

The ritual reaches its embodied culmination when Kim drives a blood-soaked wooden object into the entity's body and repeatedly strikes it. This action integrates the previously identified elements into a single ritual gesture. Wood serves as the primary instrument, while blood saturates it, visually combining multiple elemental forces into a single object. The entity's body progressively destabilizes and ultimately splits apart.



Figure 5. Kim driving blood-soaked wood into the entity's body.

(Source: *Exhuma* (2024) directed by Jang Jae-hyun)



Figure 6. Visual moment of the entity's body splitting at the ritual's culmination.

(Source: *Exhuma* (2024) directed by Jang Jae-hyun)

Across these stages, the sequence consistently follows a pattern: recognition of elemental composition, articulation of cosmological relations, and embodied enactment of those relations. This pattern demonstrates that the final sequence is organized as a ritual process grounded in cosmological logic rather than as a spontaneous act of violence. Similar to Barthes' notion that cultural meaning is structured through ordered systems of signs rather than isolated symbols (Barthes, 1977), the sequence constructs meaning through the relational progression of cognitive, verbal, and bodily signs.

The structural organization of the final sequence reveals that ritual in *Exhuma* functions as a procedural mechanism to restore order through cosmological alignment. Meaning emerges not from any single symbolic object, but from the sequential integration of knowing, speaking, and acting. This finding establishes the final sequence as a dense site of sign organization, providing the foundation for the semiotic analysis developed in the following section.

3.2. Semiotic Configuration: Denotation, Connotation, and Myth

The ritual process identified in the final sequence of *Exhuma* operates through a layered semiotic configuration in which visual and verbal signs generate meaning across denotative, connotative, and mythic levels. Rather than functioning as isolated symbols, these signs form relational clusters that collectively construct spiritual semiosis. This layered organization confirms that the sequence's meaning is produced through structured sign relations rather than through narrative explanation alone.

At the denotative level, the sequence presents a series of observable actions and objects: blood is applied, a wooden object is driven into the entity's body, the body reacts violently, and eventually splits apart. These actions are shown with clear causal continuity, allowing viewers to follow the ritual's procedural logic without relying on extended exposition.



Figure 7. Close-up of blood, a ritual substance, applied during the sequence.
(Source: *Exhuma* (2024) directed by Jang Jae-hyun)



Figure 8. Wooden object positioned as a ritual instrument. (a) Wooden object covered by blood before use; (b) Wooden object covered by blood during use.
(Source: *Exhuma* (2024) directed by Jang Jae-hyun)

At this level, signs function descriptively. Blood is a liquid substance, wood is a physical object, and bodily reaction is a visible response. However, these denotative meanings do not exhaust the signifying capacity of the sequence.

At the connotative level, blood becomes associated with vitality, contamination, and spiritual potency rather than with biology alone. Its immediate effect on the entity signals that blood operates as an active agent within

ritual space. Wood similarly exceeds its material function, connoting natural force and elemental opposition. The entity’s bodily reaction connotes vulnerability to cosmological law rather than mere physical damage.

These connotations emerge through patterned repetition and narrative framing rather than explicit explanation. Barthes notes that connotation functions by attaching cultural meanings to denotative signs, allowing objects to carry ideological and symbolic weight (Barthes, 1977). In *Exhuma*, blood and wood acquire connotative significance through their consistent placement within ritual action and their demonstrable efficacy.

At the mythic level, the sequence naturalizes a worldview in which spiritual disturbance is resolved by restoring elemental balance. Myth, in Barthes’ sense, transforms historically and culturally specific meanings into self-evident truths (Barthes, 1983). The repeated articulation that water overcomes fire and wood overcomes metal frames cosmological opposition as an unquestioned principle governing both natural and supernatural realms.

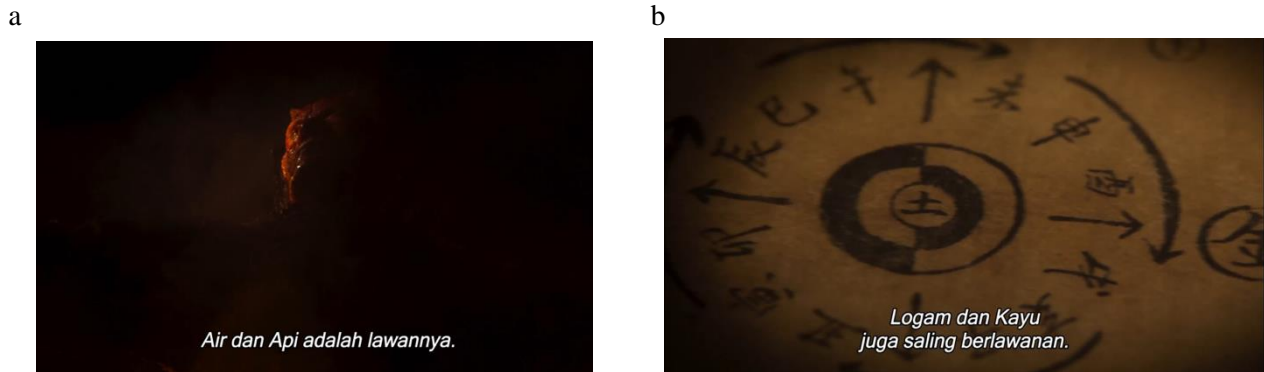


Figure 9. Subtitle articulating elemental opposition. (a)“...water overcomes fire,”; (b)“...wood overcomes metal”.

(Source: *Exhuma* (2024) directed by Jang Jae-hyun)

Through this mythic operation, the sequence presents the idea that evil is not defeated by moral superiority or superior force, but by correct alignment with cosmic order. The entity’s destruction thus signifies not only narrative closure, but the reestablishment of a naturalized cosmological hierarchy.

To clarify this layered configuration, the following table summarizes the dominant semiotic functions of key elements in the sequence.

Element	Denotation (What is shown)	Connotation (Implied meaning)	Mythic Function
Blood	Liquid is applied in ritual	Vital energy, spiritual potency	Life force restores cosmic order
Wood	Physical ritual instrument	Natural elemental force	Nature governs metal
Burning metal body	The entity appears metallic and burning	Elemental imbalance	Excess fire and metal cause disorder
Bodily reaction	Entity writhes and weakens	Vulnerability to cosmological law	Supernatural subject to cosmic order
Body splitting	The entity was divided and destroyed	Purification through rupture	Restoration of balance

The table demonstrates that meaning is produced not by single signs but by relational alignment across semiotic levels. Denotative visibility supports connotative association, which in turn stabilizes mythic worldview. The final sequence of *Exhuma* constructs spiritual semiosis through a layered semiotic configuration in which denotation, connotation, and myth operate as interdependent levels of meaning. This configuration establishes a naturalized cosmological worldview that frames ritual as the legitimate mechanism for resolving spiritual disturbance. Having established how meaning is structured semiotically, the next section examines how this configuration corresponds to the relational logic of Wu Xing as a specific cosmological system.

3.3. Wu Xing as Cosmological Logic of Spiritual Semiosis

The semiotic configuration identified in the final sequence of *Exhuma* closely aligns with the relational logic of Wu Xing, the East Asian cosmological system that conceptualizes reality as a dynamic interaction among wood, fire, earth, metal, and water. Wu Xing does not treat elements as static substances, but as processes that generate and restrain one another within a cyclical system (Kaptchuk, 2000). When read through this framework, the sequence reveals a coherent cosmological grammar underlying its ritual actions.

The entity's identification as metal establishes it within a specific elemental category. This categorization is crucial because in Wu Xing, each element is meaningful only in relation to others. Metal, when combined with excessive fire, signifies destructive intensity. The film visually encodes this condition by representing the entity as burning metal, suggesting an unstable configuration in which fire amplifies the metal's aggressive potential.



Figure 10. Visual representation of the entity as burning metal.
(Source: *Exhuma* (2024) directed by Jang Jae-hyun)

Rather than attempting to overpower the entity through greater force, the ritual introduces counter-elements that follow Wu Xing's controlling cycle. Water is introduced through the blood, while wood is introduced through the ritual instrument. In Wu Xing, water restrains fire, and wood restrains metal (Kaptchuk, 2000). The sequence visually stages these relations by showing blood provoking immediate destabilization and the wooden object penetrating the metallic body.



Figure 11. Blood applied as counter-element to burning entity.
(Source: *Exhuma* (2024) directed by Jang Jae-hyun)

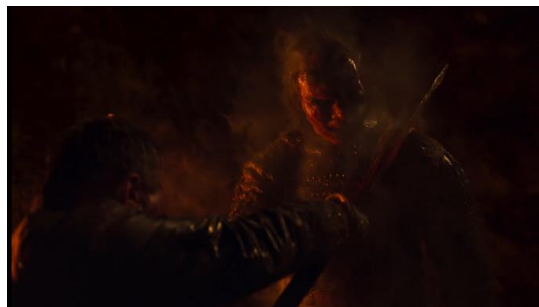


Figure 12. Wooden object penetrating a metallic body.
(Source: *Exhuma* (2024) directed by Jang Jae-hyun)

These actions demonstrate that ritual efficacy in *Exhuma* is grounded in elemental alignment rather than symbolic spectacle. The sequence thus transforms Wu Xing from an abstract cosmological doctrine into an operational visual logic. The body of the entity becomes a site where elemental relations are enacted and tested.

This cosmological logic reinforces the mythic dimension identified in Section 3.2. The entity's destruction does not signify annihilation by superior human power, but rather a collapse resulting from a restored balance. The splitting of the body functions as a visual metaphor for the release of accumulated imbalance and the reconfiguration of elemental relations.



Figure 13. Moment of bodily splitting as culmination of elemental realignment.
(Source: *Exhuma* (2024) directed by Jang Jae-hyun)

Importantly, the film does not explicitly name Wu Xing or present a didactic explanation of elemental theory. Instead, it embeds cosmological knowledge within the narrative's internal logic and the choreography of action. This aligns with Barthes' observation that myth operates by naturalizing cultural systems, presenting them as self-evident rather than taught (Barthes, 1983). Viewers are not instructed in cosmology, but are guided to accept its logic through the coherence of cause and effect.

The final sequence of *Exhuma* visualizes Wu Xing as a cosmological logic that structures spiritual semiosis. Elemental relations organize not only the ritual actions, but also the progression from disturbance to resolution. This demonstrates that the film's cosmology functions as an operative system embedded in its cinematic form. Building on this finding, the next section explores how this elemental logic remains intelligible beyond East Asian contexts through cross-cultural structural affinity.

3.4. Cross-Cultural Intelligibility of Ritual Logic

The identification of Wu Xing as the cosmological logic underlying the final sequence of *Exhuma* raises an important question: how can a system rooted in East Asian thought remain intelligible to audiences beyond its original cultural context? Rather than claiming inherent cross-cultural universality, this study proposes an interpretive reading in which intelligibility emerges through structural resonance between the film's relational logic and broader Asian cosmological sensibilities, as perceived from the researcher's Southeast Asian positionality.

Across many Asian cultural traditions, spiritual disturbance is commonly understood as a consequence of an imbalance between humans, nature, and unseen forces. Ritual practice, accordingly, functions as a mechanism for restoring relational harmony rather than merely expelling hostile entities. Indonesian scholars have long emphasized that ritual operates as a means of re-aligning microcosmic and macrocosmic relations through symbolic action and embodied practice (Sedyawati, 2006; Sutrisno, 2018).

Within this interpretive horizon, the ritual logic presented in *Exhuma* can be read as intelligible even without familiarity with Wu Xing terminology. Blood appears as an active substance capable of altering spiritual conditions, wood appears as a natural medium that confronts destructive force, and the body appears as the site where imbalance is manifested and resolved. These principles may be understood as structurally resonant with Southeast Asian ritual traditions, where material substances are not treated as inert symbols but as carriers of spiritual efficacy.



Figure 14. Body positioned as primary site of ritual confrontation.
(Source: *Exhuma* (2024) directed by Jang Jae-hyun)

The sequence also privileges process over instantaneous victory. The entity does not disappear immediately; it weakens progressively as elemental relations are activated. This gradual transformation reflects a cosmological worldview in which restoration of order requires sequential realignment rather than sudden eradication. Such logic resonates with Southeast Asian ritual epistemologies that emphasize stages of cleansing, stabilization, and reintegration.

Intertextually, this resonance operates at the level of structure rather than surface imagery. The film does not reference Southeast Asian cosmologies, nor does it attempt to hybridize visual motifs. Instead, it presents a relational system of signs that can be mapped onto multiple cosmological frameworks. This corresponds to Kristeva's conception of intertextuality as a network of cultural discourses that intersect within a text, producing meaning through relationality rather than direct citation (Kristeva, 1980).

From this perspective, *Exhuma* may be understood as a spiritual text whose intelligibility emerges through shared patterns of cosmological reasoning rather than through cultural sameness. This cross-cultural readability is not asserted as an empirical generalization about audiences, but as an analytical extension grounded in structural affinity. The sequence demonstrates how cinematic form can articulate cosmological logic in ways that allow interpretive translation across contexts. In this sense, the identified resonance with Southeast Asian spiritual epistemologies reflects a comparative reading shaped by the researcher's positional standpoint. This finding prepares the ground for a more specific intertextual reinterpretation through Javanese cosmology in the following section.

3.5. Intertextual Cosmology and Javanese Anasir

The cross-cultural intelligibility identified in the previous section can be further explored through a comparative reinterpretation of *Exhuma*'s final sequence using Javanese cosmological principles. This reading is not intended to suggest historical influence or direct equivalence, but to examine structural parallels observable from a Southeast Asian interpretive standpoint.

Javanese cosmology conceptualizes the universe as a dynamic interplay of elemental forces commonly articulated through four primary *anasir*: earth, water, fire, and wind. These elements form a relational system that governs the balance between the human body, the natural world, and the unseen realm (Sedyawati, 2006; Suseno, 1993). Spiritual disturbance is understood as a manifestation of imbalance among these *anasir*, while ritual functions as a means of restoring harmony.

When read through this framework, the burning metallic body of the entity in *Exhuma* corresponds to excessive fire dominating a material form. Such dominance parallels Javanese understandings of destructive heat as a sign of disorder within the body and cosmos. The introduction of blood into the ritual may be interpreted comparatively as resonant with the water *anasir*, which, in Javanese cosmology, carries cooling and purifying qualities. This parallel operates at the level of functional analogy rather than symbolic identity.



Figure 15. Blood is introduced as a cooling and purifying medium.
(Source: *Exhuma* (2024) directed by Jang Jae-hyun)

The wooden ritual instrument may be read, within this comparative framework, as functionally analogous to the earth *anasir*. Wood originates from the ground and mediates between soil and living growth, positioning it as a material extension of terrestrial order. Its insertion into the entity's body symbolically suggests the grounding or re-anchoring of chaotic force into a stabilizing element. Within Javanese cosmological reasoning, the earth is associated with weight, containment, and structural balance. The analogy, therefore, emphasizes relational grounding and material stabilization rather than asserting cosmological equivalence between systems. In this reading, wood operates as a mediating substance that restores order through contact with embodied materiality.



Figure 16. Wooden object functioning as an anchoring medium.
(Source: *Exhuma* (2024) directed by Jang Jae-hyun)

Wind, although not explicitly visualized, may be heuristically inferred through the movement of energy, sound, and bodily convulsion. This inference remains interpretive and serves to complete the relational mapping rather than to claim direct textual representation. In Javanese thought, wind is closely associated with breath, life force, and the circulation of inner energy. The violent convulsions of the body during ritual enactment may thus be understood as the release and redistribution of disordered energy.



Figure 17. Bodily convulsion is the release of internal energy.
(Source: *Exhuma* (2024) directed by Jang Jae-hyun)

This mapping does not propose equivalence between Wu Xing and Javanese *anasir* systems. Rather, it demonstrates that both cosmologies operate through relational models in which elements regulate one another and in which ritual serves as a mediating mechanism. The intertextual relationship here is therefore structural rather than iconographic.

Kristeva's conception of intertextuality emphasizes that texts are constituted by the intersection of multiple cultural discourses (Kristeva, 1980). In this sense, *Exhuma* may be read as a site where East Asian cosmological logic intersects with broader Asian epistemologies of balance, embodiment, and ritual. The film's semiotic configuration enables this intersection without explicit cross-cultural reference.

Reinterpreting the final sequence of *Exhuma* through Javanese *anasir* does not propose doctrinal equivalence between cosmological systems, nor does it imply historical interconnection. Rather, it suggests that the film's spiritual semiosis can be understood through structural affinities observable across distinct yet relational cosmological frameworks. This comparative reading demonstrates how ritual signs in the film operate within a relational grammar of balance, mediation, and embodied restoration that resonates beyond its immediate East Asian context. Such resonance is presented here as an analytical extension grounded in structural analogy, shaped by the researcher's Southeast Asian interpretive standpoint. Together with the preceding analyses, this section reinforces the argument that *Exhuma* constructs spiritual meaning through an organized system of relational signs, enabling cross-cultural intelligibility at the level of cosmological logic rather than cultural identity.

4. Conclusion

This study set out to examine how the structure of signs and intertextual relations in the final sequence of *Exhuma* construct spiritual semiosis through symbols and ritual rooted in East Asian cosmology, while remaining intelligible to audiences from different cultural backgrounds. Through a qualitative semiotic and intertextual analysis, the study demonstrates that the film's concluding ritual sequence is not a chaotic spectacle of supernatural violence but a coherent cosmological process articulated through cinematic form.

The findings show that the final sequence is structured as a ritual process consisting of three interconnected phases: cognitive recognition of elemental composition, verbal articulation of cosmological principles, and embodied enactment through ritual action. This structure establishes that narrative resolution in *Exhuma* is achieved through alignment with the cosmological order rather than by asserting human dominance over supernatural forces.

At the semiotic level, the sequence operates through a layered configuration of denotation, connotation, and myth. Objects such as blood and wood, bodily reactions, and elemental articulations function as relational signs whose meanings emerge through patterned interaction. At the mythic level, these signs naturalize a worldview in which spiritual disturbance is resolved by restoring balance among elemental forces. This configuration confirms that the film's spiritual meaning is produced through sign relations rather than through explicit doctrinal explanation.

The study further demonstrates that this semiotic configuration corresponds closely to the relational logic of Wu Xing. The identification of the entity as burning metal and the introduction of water and wood as counter-elements visualize the controlling cycle of elements as an operative system embedded within narrative action. Wu Xing thus functions not as a background cultural reference but as a cosmological grammar that structures spiritual semiosis within the film.

Importantly, this study suggests that the cosmological grammar structuring the final sequence of *Exhuma* may remain intelligible beyond its immediate East Asian context. Through structural resonance identified via comparative analysis with Southeast Asian spiritual epistemologies—particularly those emphasizing relationality among body, nature, and unseen forces—the film's ritual logic becomes analytically legible without requiring explicit prior knowledge of Wu Xing. This cross-cultural intelligibility is not presented as an empirical generalization about audience reception, but as an inference derived from structural correspondence at the level of relational cosmological logic. The reinterpretation through Javanese *anasir* further supports this analytical extension, demonstrating that intertextuality operates at the level of structural affinity rather than symbolic surface or cultural equivalence.

The primary contribution of this study lies in proposing spiritual semiosis as an analytical lens for examining Asian horror cinema. This lens foregrounds how cinematic form can serve as a medium for cosmological knowledge, extending existing approaches that primarily focus on genre, affect, or cultural representation. By combining semiotics and intertextuality within a cosmological framework, the study offers a model for analyzing horror films as sites of intertextual spiritual discourse.

This study is limited to textual analysis of a single film sequence and does not incorporate audience reception data. Consequently, claims regarding cross-cultural intelligibility are inferred from structural

analysis rather than empirical evidence. Future research may expand this approach through comparative studies of multiple Asian horror films, audience-based investigations, or integration with ethnographic perspectives on ritual and cosmology.

Overall, *Exhuma* may be understood as an intertextual spiritual text that articulates cosmological reasoning through cinematic signs. The film illustrates how contemporary Asian horror cinema can function as a medium for structuring spiritual knowledge through visual form and ritual logic. Rather than asserting universal cross-cultural accessibility, this study proposes that such cosmological articulation becomes interpretable across contexts when approached through relational semiotic analysis. In this sense, the film's spiritual semiosis demonstrates the capacity of cinematic form to organize cosmological meaning beyond explicit doctrinal exposition.

5. Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank Dr. Budi Setiyono, M.Si., as the supervisor and second author of this article, for his continuous guidance, constructive feedback, and critical insights throughout the research and writing process. The author would also like to thank Dwi Putri Nugrahaning Widhi, S.Sn., M.Sn., as the film advisor, for her valuable perspectives on cinematic context and narrative interpretation. Sincere appreciation is extended to Dr. Sn. Angga Kusuma Dawami, S.Sn., M.Sn., for his direction in shaping the conceptual and writing structure of this article. The author is also deeply grateful to Prof. Dr. Santosa, S.Kar., M.Mus., M.A., whose artistic vision and scholarly work have been a significant source of inspiration in framing the artistic and analytical orientation of this study. This article would not have reached this stage without their support, suggestions, and criticisms.

References

- Ahimsa-Putra, H. S. (2012). *Strukturalisme Levi-Strauss: Mitos dan karya sastra*. Kepel Press.
- Barthes, R. (1977). *Image, music, text* (S. Heath, Trans.). Fontana Press.
- Barthes, R. (1983). *Mythologies* (A. Lavers, Trans.). Hill and Wang.
- Bordwell, D. (2008). *Poetics of cinema*. Routledge.
- Bordwell, D., & Thompson, K. (2013). *Film art: An introduction* (10th ed.). McGraw-Hill.
- Carroll, N. (1990). *The philosophy of horror, or paradoxes of the heart*. Routledge.
- Choi, J. (2010). *The South Korean film renaissance: Local hitmakers, global provocateurs*. Wesleyan University Press.
- Cousins, M. (2011). *The story of film*. Pavilion Books.
- Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (3rd ed.). Sage.
- Eliade, M. (1959). *The sacred and the profane: The nature of religion* (W. R. Trask, Trans.). Harcourt, Brace & World.
- Hall, S. (1997). *Representation: Cultural representations and signifying practices*. Sage.
- Hutcheon, L. (2006). *A theory of adaptation*. Routledge.
- Jang, J.-h. (Director). (2024). *Exhuma* [Film]. Showbox.
- Kaptchuk, T. J. (2000). *The web that has no weaver: Understanding Chinese medicine* (2nd ed.). McGraw-Hill.
- Kim, K. H. (2011). *Virtual hysteria: Disease, contagion, and the cinema of South Korea*. Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822394358>
- Kristeva, J. (1980). *Desire in language: A semiotic approach to literature and art* (T. Gora, A. Jardine, & L. S. Roudiez, Trans.). Columbia University Press.
- Mitchell, T. (2018). *Korean cinema in crisis: Memory, identity, and aesthetics*. Routledge.
- Paquet, D. (2009). *New Korean cinema: Breaking the waves*. Columbia University Press.
- Ratna, N. K. (2010). *Metodologi penelitian kajian budaya dan ilmu sosial humaniora pada umumnya*. Pustaka Pelajar.
- Sedyawati, E. (2006). *Budaya Indonesia: Kajian arkeologi, seni, dan sejarah*. RajaGrafindo Persada.
- Sulistiwati, D., & Mujani, S. (2024). Cultural representation and spiritual values in contemporary Korean horror cinema: A study of *Exhuma*. *Journal of Asian Cultural Studies*, 12(2), 210–225.

Sumardjo, J. (2000). *Filsafat seni*. ITB Press.

Suseno, F. M. (1993). *Etika Jawa: Sebuah analisa falsafi tentang kebijaksanaan hidup Jawa*. Gramedia Pustaka Utama.

Sutrisno, M. (2018). *Estetika: Filsafat keindahan dan seni*. Kanisius.