



Representing and mediating political memory through visual activism: a hermeneutic analysis of Ambara's Wiji Thukul: planting words poster



I Gusti Ngurah Tri Marutama ^{a,1,*}, Bambang Sunarto ^{b,2}, Mudji Sutrisno ^{c,3}

^a Universitas Sebelas Maret, Surakarta, 57126, Indonesia

^b Institut Seni Indonesia Surakarta, Surakarta, 57126, Indonesia

^c Sekolah Tinggi Filsafat Driyarkara, Jakarta Pusat, 10520, Indonesia

¹ marutama@staff.uns.ac.id; ² bambangsunarto@isi-ska.ac.id; ³ kumandangingsepi@gmail.com

* Corresponding Author

ABSTRACT

This study examines how *Ambara's Wiji Thukul: Planting Words* poster represents and supports the mediation of political memory through visual activism in post New Order Indonesia. Previous studies of Indonesian action posters have primarily focused on symbolism, visual rhetoric, and political messaging, while giving limited attention to how activist posters mediate historical memory through their visual form. Using a qualitative case study design and a Ricoeurian hermeneutic approach, the study analyses the poster alongside historical documents, artist statements, and literature on Indonesian political activism. The findings show that political memory is mediated through a recurring visual structure centred on the figure of Wiji Thukul, stencil aesthetics, resistance-oriented textual fragments, agricultural imagery, and a red-black color palette. These elements organize narratives of disappearance, state violence, democratic resistance, and social justice into a coherent visual framework. The study demonstrates that activist posters function not only as commemorative artefacts but also as mnemonic media that represent historical experience and support the circulation of political memory within contemporary Indonesian political culture.



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Article History

Received 2025-12-18

Revised 2026-05-16

Accepted 2026-06-25

Keywords

Visual Activism,
Political Memory,
Hermeneutic,
Action Posters
Indonesia

1. Introduction

Visual design has played an important role in Indonesia's political communication landscape, particularly through posters that have functioned as instruments of both state authority and public resistance. During the New Order era, visual media frequently served as tools of ideological dissemination and political control. Following the Reformasi of 1998, however, posters increasingly became vehicles for social criticism, political advocacy, and civic engagement within a more open democratic environment [1]. In this context, action posters emerged as a significant form of visual activism through which citizens articulated political demands, social concerns, and collective aspirations [2], [3]. Research on visual activism has demonstrated that activist media do more than communicate political messages. Posters, street art, and other visual interventions organize political meanings, mobilize affective responses, and facilitate public engagement with social issues [4]–[6]. Within this perspective, visual activism refers to the strategic use of visual media to communicate political positions and intervene in public discourse. Visual activism refers to the strategic use of visual media to communicate political positions and intervene in public discourse. Prosthetic memory explains how media enable individuals to engage with historical experiences beyond direct lived experience [7]. The interaction between visual structure and historical representation allows visual artefacts to function as mediators between historical events, public interpretation, and political consciousness.

Recent studies have shown that visual media contribute to the circulation of historical narratives and collective understandings of political events [8]–[10]. Research on prosthetic memory has further demonstrated how film, museums, archives, and digital platforms mediate historical knowledge and shape public engagement with the past [11], [12]. Despite these developments, two important limitations remain. First, studies of Indonesian action posters have predominantly focused on symbolism, visual rhetoric, and political messages, while giving limited attention to how visual structures mediate political memory [13], [14]. Second, scholarship on prosthetic memory continues to privilege film, museums, archives, and digital media, leaving mobile and ephemeral visual forms such as action posters largely underexamined. Consequently, little is known about how the visual structure of activist posters functions as a mnemonic mechanism that makes political memory publicly visible and culturally meaningful. This limitation is also evident in studies of Ambara's visual practice. Existing research has primarily interpreted his posters as forms of political criticism, ideological expression, and social advocacy [15]–[17]. While these studies illuminate the communicative and political dimensions of his work, they offer only a limited explanation of how visual composition, symbolic organization, and historically situated creative intent interact to mediate political memory. Moreover, previous scholarship rarely examines the relationship between creative intent and the hermeneutic processes through which visual elements acquire historical and political significance.

Unlike previous studies that focus primarily on symbolism, representation, or political messaging, this study examines an activist poster as a mnemonic visual structure through which political memory is represented and mediated. The study focuses on Ambara's *Wiji Thukul: Planting Words* poster because it brings together a historically significant political figure, a visual language of resistance, and a broader discourse on democracy and human rights in post-authoritarian Indonesia. Wiji Thukul occupies a prominent position in Indonesian political memory as a poet and pro-democracy activist who disappeared during the final years of the New Order regime and subsequently became a symbol of resistance against political repression and human rights violations. The poster, therefore, provides a valuable case for investigating how visual activism engages with historical memory in contemporary political culture. This study aims to analyze how visual elements and historical context interact to represent and mediate political memory in Ambara's *Wiji Thukul: Planting Words* poster. The study contributes to memory studies by extending discussions of prosthetic memory beyond film, museums, archives, and digital media to activist posters. It also contributes to visual culture scholarship by demonstrating how visual structure and creative intent operate as mnemonic mechanisms within visual activism. More broadly, the study advances understanding of how activist posters function not merely as instruments of political communication but also as visual media through which historical experience is represented, interpreted, and circulated in contemporary Indonesia.

2. Method

This study employed a qualitative single-case study design to examine the mediation of political memory through *Alit Ambara's Wiji Thukul: Planting Words* poster [18]. The study selected the poster as a theoretically significant case because it combines visual activism, political symbolism, and the historical legacy of *Wiji Thukul* within a single visual artefact [19]. This combination makes the poster a theoretically relevant case for examining the relationship between visual structure and historical meaning. The study utilized three data sources. The study treated the poster as the primary unit of analysis to identify composition, color, typography, imagery, symbolism, visual hierarchy, and text-image relationships. The study used academic publications, historical records, newspaper articles, and public documents to establish the research's historical and theoretical context. The study obtained additional data from a recorded session of *Sarasehan #Posteraksi: Diskusi Merespon Situasi Politik Aktual Melalui Karya Seni*, held on 13 June 2024. The discussion featured Alit Ambara, Obed Bima Wicandra, and St. Sunardi as speakers. The discussion addressed the historical background, creative process, political significance, and contemporary relevance of the poster. Data were analyzed using a Ricoeurian hermeneutic framework. Ricoeur conceptualizes interpretation as a movement from explanation toward understanding through the mediation of texts [20].

Within this perspective, the poster was treated as an autonomous visual text whose meaning extends beyond its creator's intentions and becomes available for interpretation within broader historical and cultural contexts [21], [22].

The analysis proceeded through three stages. The first stage involved naïve reading ("prefiguration"), in which the researcher identified and described the poster's visible formal elements, including composition, color, typography, imagery, and symbolic references. The second stage involved structural analysis ("configuration"), examining relationships among visual elements, symbolic structures, and historical references to explain how meaning was organised within the poster. The recurring visual structures presented in Table 1 were identified through iterative coding and comparison across the three poster versions. Elements that consistently appeared across versions were classified as recurring visual structures and subsequently interpreted in relation to their symbolic meaning, prosthetic memory potential, and ideological orientation. The third stage involved critical interpretation ("refiguration"), integrating visual analysis, documentary evidence, and discussion data to interpret how the poster represents and supports the mediation of political memory within post-Reformation Indonesia. This stage connected the text's world with broader socio-political narratives about democracy, resistance, and human rights. Interpretive credibility was enhanced through methodological triangulation, source triangulation, and reflexive verification [23]. Visual analysis, documentary materials, and discussion transcripts were systematically compared to strengthen interpretive consistency. An audit trail comprising coding records, visual annotations, discussion transcripts, analytical notes, and interpretive memos was maintained to ensure transparency and reliability throughout the research process. Fig. 1 presents the analytical framework used in this study.

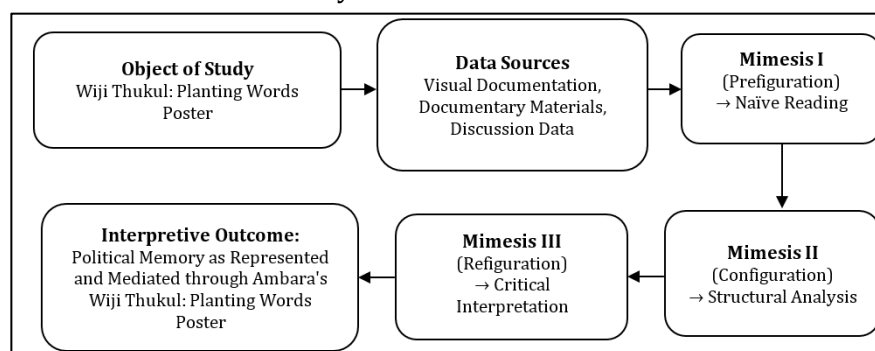


Fig 1. Ricoeurian Hermeneutic Framework for Analyzing the Representation and Mediation of Political Memory in Ambara's *Wiji Thukul: Planting Words* Poster

The framework integrates visual documentation, documentary materials, and discussion data within a three-stage Ricoeurian hermeneutic process consisting of naïve reading ("prefiguration"), structural analysis ("configuration"), and critical interpretation ("refiguration"). Through this process, the poster is interpreted as a visual text that represents and supports the mediation of political memory within contemporary Indonesian political culture.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Results

The analysis sought to identify which visual elements consistently appeared across the three versions of "*Wiji Thukul: Planting Words*". Elements that recurred throughout the series were treated as indicators of visual dominance because their repetition contributed to the stability of the poster's overall visual structure. Rather than examining individual symbols in isolation, the analysis considered how recurring visual configurations organized meaning across different poster versions. Table 1 summarizes the dominant visual elements, their recurrence, symbolic functions, potential contribution to the mediation of prosthetic memory, and their ideological significance. The categories of symbolic meaning, prosthetic memory potential, and ideological orientation were derived through hermeneutic interpretation of recurring visual elements identified across the three poster versions.

Tabel 1. Recurring Visual Structures and Analytical Interpretation in Wiji Thukul: Planting.

Visual Structure	P1	P2	P3	Recurrence	Symbolic Meaning	Prosthetic Memory Potential	Ideological Orientation
Figure of Wiji Thukul	✓	✓	✓	3/3 (100%)	Historical witness, resistance figure	May provide symbolic resources through which contemporary audiences relate to histories of repression and struggle	Resistance, democratic consciousness
Digital Stencil Aesthetics	✓	✓	✓	3/3 (100%)	Activist visual language, public intervention	May contribute to visual continuity across repeated encounters with historical themes	Advocacy, counter-hegemonic expression
Red Colour Dominance	✓	✓	✓	3/3 (100%)	Urgency, struggle, political contestation	May increase the affective salience of historical narratives	Resistance, mobilization
Black Contrast	✓	✓	✓	3/3 (100%)	Conflict, oppression, unresolved history	May enhance mnemonic visibility and visual salience	Critique of authoritarianism
Poetic Text Fragment " <i>telah kami sebar biji-biji, suatu saat kami akan tumbuh bersama. Dengan keyakinan, engkau akan hancur!</i> ".	✓	✓	✓	3/3 (100%)	Dissemination of ideas and collective struggle	May support remembrance through textual repetition	Critical awareness, political education
Theme of Resistance	✓	✓	✓	3/3 (100%)	Opposition to repression and injustice	Provides symbolic references for collective identification	Social advocacy
Theme of Collective Memory	✓	✓	✓	3/3 (100%)	Shared remembrance of political violence	May provide interpretive links between past struggles and present concerns	Historical consciousness
Theme of Critical Awareness	✓	✓	✓	3/3 (100%)	Reflection on social conditions	Provides resources for historical interpretation and reflection	Public education

Visual Structure	P1	P2	P3	Recurrence	Symbolic Meaning	Prosthetic Memory Potential	Ideological Orientation
Symmetrical Composition	✓	-	✓	2/3 (66.7%)	Stability and visual authority	May stabilize historical interpretation across poster versions	Persistence of resistance
Asymmetrical Composition	-	✓	-	1/3 (33.3%)	Dynamism and tension	May present history as unfinished and contested	Critical engagement
Books, Stars, Flowers, Fire	-	-	✓	1/3 (33.3%)	Knowledge, hope, growth, transformation	May expand interpretive possibilities beyond commemoration	Emancipation, future orientation



Poster 1 (P1)Poster 2 (P2)Poster 3 (P3)

Table 1 demonstrates that the figure of *Wiji Thukul*, stencil aesthetics, red-black color configuration, resistance-oriented poetry, and themes of resistance, collective memory, and critical awareness recur across all three poster versions (100%). These recurring elements constitute the series' dominant visual structure. The consistency of these elements provides empirical evidence that the posters rely on a stable visual configuration through which political resistance, historical remembrance, and democratic struggle are repeatedly articulated. The recurrence pattern shown in Table 1 indicates that the visual consistency of the poster series is concentrated in eight core elements that appear in all three versions. The figure of *Wiji Thukul*, stencil aesthetics, red-black color contrasts, resistance-oriented poetry, and themes of resistance, collective memory, and critical awareness collectively form the structural core of the series. In contrast, compositional arrangements and supplementary symbolic elements vary across versions, suggesting controlled visual variation within an otherwise stable visual framework. This pattern demonstrates that continuity is achieved primarily through the repetition of key visual and thematic elements rather than through complete formal uniformity.

3.2. Discussion

3.2.1. Visual Structure as an Epistemic Dispositif

Table 1 shows that the "*Wiji Thukul: Planting Words*" poster series constructs an epistemic dispositif through the systematic recurrence of *Wiji Thukul's* image, digital stencil aesthetics, red-black color contrasts, resistance-oriented poetic fragments, and collective memory themes. This recurring configuration stabilizes meanings associated with political repression, resistance, and democratic struggle. This study defines an epistemic dispositif as a visual arrangement that directs attention, organises symbolic relations, and structures the interpretive possibilities available to viewers [24], [25]. The posters establish a stable interpretive framework that renders histories of repression and resistance publicly recognizable. The repetition of visual elements performs an epistemic function by organizing how audiences encounter and interpret political history within visual culture [4], [5]. The findings extend conventional semiotic approaches that primarily emphasize symbolic

signification. Table 1 demonstrates that visual coherence arises from the systematic recurrence of multiple visual elements rather than from isolated symbols. The recurring configuration generates interpretive frameworks that connect *Wiji Thukul's* historical experience to broader narratives of resistance, democracy, and social justice [14], [26]. In this context, knowledge production organises and circulates ways of understanding political history through visual representation rather than producing new historical facts [27]. The posters, therefore, function not merely as communicative artefacts but also as mechanisms that structure how political history becomes publicly intelligible.

This epistemic function acquires particular significance within Indonesia. The collapse of authoritarian rule expanded opportunities for public remembrance while leaving many histories of political violence unresolved [28]. Competing interpretations continue to shape public debates concerning state accountability, democratic transition, and human rights violations. The disappearance of *Wiji Thukul* occupies a central position within these debates because his case symbolizes both state repression and the unfinished demands of democratic reform. Wilson demonstrates that post-Reformasi activists and civil society groups have continuously reproduced *Wiji Thukul* as a symbol of democratic resistance and democratic memory [29]. The complete recurrence of *Wiji Thukul's* image across all poster versions suggests that Ambara's poster series participates in this broader mnemonic practice. The recurring visual presence of *Wiji Thukul*, therefore, does more than commemorate a historical figure. The repetition transforms his image into a stable reference through which broader questions of justice, citizenship, and political participation remain publicly visible [30]. The findings further suggest that visual repetition operates as a mechanism of epistemic stabilization. The posters repeatedly connect the same figure, colors, aesthetic conventions, and poetic fragments to the same political meanings. This recurring association increases the visibility of particular interpretations of Indonesian political history. Increased visibility enhances the legitimacy of these interpretations within public culture. The posters consequently privilege narratives of democratic resistance and state violence over narratives that depoliticize or marginalize historical conflict. This process does not determine how audiences interpret the posters. This process instead structures a field of interpretive possibility in which certain historical associations become more recognizable and memorable than others. The epistemic dispositif therefore functions through selective visibility rather than through ideological imposition [26].

The recurring presence of *Wiji Thukul's* image across all poster versions stabilizes a visual reference point for public engagement with histories of repression and democratic struggle. The image functions as a symbolic node that connects personal experience, collective memory, and political consciousness [17], [31]. The posters, therefore, operate as visual infrastructures that sustain historical awareness beyond formal educational and commemorative institutions. This infrastructural role becomes particularly important because public memory in contemporary Indonesia increasingly depends on dispersed visual media rather than on state-sponsored historical narratives alone. The posters expand the circulation of alternative historical knowledge by embedding political memory within everyday visual environments. The posters generate knowledge production by organizing interpretive frameworks that connect representations of *Wiji Thukul* to histories of political repression, democratic struggle, and social justice. These frameworks transform historical references into symbolic resources that wider publics can access and mobilize. This transformation establishes the cognitive conditions that enable prosthetic memory to emerge. Knowledge production consequently mediates the relationship between visual representation and the formation of prosthetic memory [32]. The findings, therefore, suggest that activist poster design participates not only in political communication but also in the ongoing social production of historical knowledge. The posters preserve the visibility of contested histories by repeatedly embedding them within contemporary visual culture. The epistemic dispositif consequently operates as a mechanism that links visual representation, political memory, and democratic consciousness across generations.

3.2.2. Visual Repetition and the Mediation of Prosthetic Memory

The findings indicate that the poster series contains visual conditions that support the mediation of prosthetic memory. Table 1 shows that *Wiji Thukul's* image, activist stencil

aesthetics, red-black color configurations, and resistance-oriented poetic fragments recur consistently across all poster versions. This recurrence creates mnemonic stability by repeatedly associating *Wiji Thukul* with histories of political repression and democratic resistance. The study does not claim that audiences formed prosthetic memory, as it does not examine audience reception. The study instead identifies visual mechanisms that create the conditions under which prosthetic memory may emerge. The recurring visual configuration provides mnemonic resources that enable individuals without direct experience of state repression to encounter historical narratives associated with *Wiji Thukul*. These resources support processes of recognition and reflection by maintaining the visibility of historical resistance across changing political contexts [33], [34]. Previous studies have primarily examined prosthetic memory through museums, audiovisual media, digital archives, and social media platforms [8], [30], [35], [36]. The present findings suggest that activist posters may perform a comparable mnemonic function through visual repetition and symbolic continuity. The posters condense complex histories of violence, censorship, and democratic struggle into recurring visual forms rather than into detailed historical narratives. This condensation transforms political history into a set of recognizable visual references that can circulate across different public settings. The repeated use of red-black contrasts, stencil aesthetics, and poetic fragments increases the affective salience of historical representation [37]. This affective salience sustains public attention toward unresolved histories of state violence and democratic contestation. The posters, therefore, function not merely as commemorative artefacts but as visual interventions that reactivate political questions that remain contested within contemporary Indonesia.

The recurring visual configuration provides mnemonic resources that enable individuals without direct experience of political repression to encounter historical narratives associated with *Wiji Thukul*. These mnemonic resources support processes of recognition and reflection by maintaining the visibility of historical resistance across different contexts [33], [34]. The democratic transition expanded opportunities for public remembrance while leaving many unresolved histories of political violence. The disappearance of *Wiji Thukul* remains emblematic of broader struggles over truth, accountability, and historical recognition [17]. The recurring visual presence of *Wiji Thukul*, therefore, does more than preserve historical memory. The repetition transforms his image into a symbolic site through which contemporary publics can negotiate the meaning of democracy, citizenship, and state power. The posters consequently connect an individual biography to wider narratives of human rights advocacy and democratic resistance. This connection enables historical memory to serve as a resource for interpreting present political conditions rather than merely as a record of the past. The findings further suggest that visual repetition performs an ideological function by stabilizing particular interpretations of political history. The recurring association between *Wiji Thukul*, resistance-oriented poetry, and activist aesthetics foregrounds narratives of democratic struggle while marginalizing alternative readings that detach political repression from contemporary social concerns. This process does not impose a fixed meaning on audiences. The process instead establishes a structured field of interpretation in which certain historical associations become more visible, legitimate, and memorable than others. Visual repetition, therefore, operates as a mechanism of mnemonic framing that organises how political history becomes publicly intelligible [26].

Taken together, the findings indicate that Ambara's posters function not only as instruments of political communication but also as mnemonic visual infrastructures that support the circulation of political memory in contemporary Indonesia. Table 1 demonstrates that recurring visual structures sustain public engagement with histories of repression, resistance, and democratic struggle within the post-authoritarian public sphere [1], [38]. Visual repetition constitutes the primary mechanism that enables this process. The recurring presence of *Wiji Thukul*'s image, activist stencil aesthetics, resistance-oriented poetry, and red-black color contrasts repeatedly associates the same historical figure with the same political meanings. This recurring association stabilizes historical references across poster versions. Stable references increase the visibility of political memory within public culture. Increased visibility provides mnemonic resources that keep historical narratives publicly accessible. These mnemonic resources create conditions that allow political memory to be revisited, reinterpreted, and

politically mobilized over time. Political memory, therefore, depends not only on historical events themselves but also on the continued circulation of visual forms that make those events culturally and politically meaningful [39]. Accordingly, this study contributes by identifying how recurring visual structures support the mnemonic mediation of political history and sustain democratic memory within the contemporary Indonesian public sphere.

4. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that *Ambara's "Wiji Thukul: Planting Words"* poster represents and supports the mediation of political memory through the interaction of visual structure, historical references, and symbolic organization. The analysis shows that recurring visual elements, including the figure of Wiji Thukul, stencil aesthetics, resistance-oriented textual fragments, and a red-black color palette, collectively organize narratives of resistance, democracy, and human rights within post-Reformation Indonesia. These findings contribute empirically to the study of Indonesian visual activism by demonstrating how activist posters function as visual media through which historical experience is represented, interpreted, and circulated. The study also contributes theoretically by extending discussions of political memory and prosthetic memory beyond film, museums, archives, and digital platforms to the context of activist posters. However, the findings are limited to a single case and focus on visual interpretation rather than audience reception, production processes, or social impact. Future research may examine multiple activist posters, comparative visual traditions, and audience engagement to understand further how visual activism supports the circulation and mediation of political memory in contemporary society.

Acknowledgment

The authors gratefully acknowledge Bambang Sunarto and Mudji Sutrisno, whose scholarly works have provided valuable theoretical insights and intellectual inspiration for the development of this study. The interpretations and conclusions presented in this article are solely those of the authors.

Declarations

- Author contribution** : The author conceived the study, developed the theoretical framework, conducted the analysis, and wrote and revised the manuscript.
- Funding statement** : This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.
- Conflict of interest** : The authors declare no conflict of interest.
- Additional information** : No additional information is available for this paper.

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