Representation of Putin's Identity in *Time*: *An Ambiguous Partiality*

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Abstract: Two main candidates in the 2016 U.S. presidential election were Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton. In this election, news about foreign intervention, especially Russia, was so massive. One of the forms of foreign intervention that can be analyzed is by dismantling an edition of Time Magazine that is published exactly a month prior to electoral vote. This edition presented Vladimir Putin on its cover. This selection was certainly without agenda. To decode the meaning behind it, the author used an analysis of *Tata Pembermaknaan* by Barthes (1990). The author analyzed the cover through a visual analysis of cultural studies approach. This method analyzed reader exclusivity perspective, an image of aging Putin, and relationship between the U.S. presidential election and visual color and typeface on the cover. The research concluded that representation of Putin in Time indicates a partiality of American media towards Russia even though on the other side there is contestation towards Russian power represented by Putin.

1 INTRODUCTION

To discuss about how the identity of Russia's president –Vladimir Putin— is being constructed is not easy since Putin's Identity is very complex and never single. If we are to explore Putin's identity, we need to see several identities that can be attributed to this president of Russia. He can be identified as the former Russia's prime minister, former member and the head of KGB, a skilful Judo athlete, or even a national awakening figure for the Russian Federation. These various identities are of course due to his position as the President of Russia (1999 - 2008; 2012 - present) and how he is represented in media.

Putin's identities, which are constructed by media, have very distinct features compared to identity construction of the Russia's first president after the collapse of Soviet Union, which is Boris Yeltsin. Yeltsin constructs an image of Russia as a new state, based on democracy, a friend to western world, and a state that contradicts everything related to the totalitarian of Soviet Union (Gidadhubli, 2007).

However, it is known that Putin's branding strategy contradicts to Yeltsin's. Putin utilizes mass media to highlight his branding pictures, yet behind that he administers a terrorizing government for Russians. Putin utilizes his power as the president to control his photographs circulated by state owned news agencies. Since his ruling period, the government censorship institution revives after its closing when USSR collapsed.

Through the state owned news agencies, Vladimir Putin often presents some photographs accompanied with a piece of news that reflect Putin's perspective or pro-Russian discourse. The news circulated from these news agencies will always be an editorial from a single perspective, which is the government's perspective. Therefore, the photographs published by the state owned news agencies, for instance, RIA *Novosti* and RT become problematic because it becomes the formation of Putin's individual cult. The research by Sanja Bjelica suggests that the photographs published through media in Russia attribute Putin with a heroic and even male-machismo persona. In contrast, western media depicts Putin as a feminine figure (Bjelica, 2014). An image of Putin that loves to explore his body by chess-baring or swimming out in an open space is read as an objectification of his body likewise women are being objectified in visual scenes. Putin positing himself as a macho-man is instead seen by western media as a feminine side being hidden.

In this article, the author will analyze identity construction of Putin through a cover of Time. Photography is the main avenue to build one's image

(Sontag, 1977). Putin's image that he constructs through Russian media due to its strict and controlled censorship impacted to the image constructed by foreign media. The selected edition is the October 10th, 2016 copy. The corpus is selected because it is the most 'original' copy circulated closest to where the editorial is so that the cover is free from censorship. In visual analysis of cultural studies, a visual—photography, painting, advertising—cannot be taken out of context. The analysis puts an image as a text that has a social and historical context. In addition, an image cannot be separated from the publishing factors, such as the place it is published and the audience it targets (Van Leeuwen and Jewitt, 2000)

The Asia-Pacific edition has a different cover with the one disseminated for its exclusive subscriber. The special subscriber is marked by a visual sign "*Subscriber Only*" at the top of the cover. The article aims to discuss the presented image of Putin through the visual and its textual narration (the accompanying article). The narration of Putin that is shifting as the US presidential election begins, the author believes, has particular reasons that can be explored further. The author analyzes the corpus with Barthes's studium-punctum method of analysis (1990) and a visual analysis of cultural studies by Van Leeuwen and Jewitt (2000). The research aims to see the meanings underlying in the Time's cover edition October 10th, 2016 by dissecting the cover details.

2 METHODS

This study use stadium punctum approach and photography analysis method in analysing Putin representations. There is a significant deference between representations of Putin in Russian Media and in the US media. From several photos of Putin in Russian media, the constructed image is always associated with populism, nationalism, and a dictatorial government (Foxall, 2013). The photographs published by the state owned news agencies, such as RT, RIA *Novosti*, Sputnik, ITAR-TASS, have undergone a filtering and selection process by the Ministry of Communications and Mass Media of the Russian Federation, whose authorities includes deciding if a news can be published or not. What is interesting is that Time magazine does not construct a similar narration. This is actually a result from different portrayal of Putin in the west/the states. Putin is depicted as a bad –sly man and even a person that hides his feminine side in his masculinity branding (Bjelica, 2014).

One of the western or the U.S. magazines is the Time. This magazine uses American journalism perspective, employs no censorship, and has no relation to the Russian government. However, within the period of January-October 2016, it always portrays Putin within the discourse of masculinity, nationalism, populist and a strong leader similar to what Russian media have been constructing. This might be due to the context of the U.S. political year as it is the year of the U.S. presidential election. The 2016 US presidential election cannot be separated from issue of populism that is constructed by both Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton. Interestingly, the redaction chosen to accompany the October 2016 edition is "*Russia wants to undermine faith in the U.S. election. Don't fall for it*" and in the cover is also a figure of Putin smiling. The contradiction between the headlines with the photograph will be explored further in this article through stadium-punctum analysis by Roland Barthes and the cultural studies approach of visual analysis.

In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes explains two approaches usually used in photography, which are studium and punctum. Barthes has discussed photography in *The Photographic Message* and *Rhetoric of the Images*. An apparent difference is in its research objects. In *The Photographic Message*, Barthes focuses its research on pictures published by press, whereas in *Rhetoric of the Images*, pictures of advertisements in magazines become the focus. In these two essays, Barthes makes visible how mechanism in photography is formed, from a picture as an object to its 'a reader'. A picture generates a meaning that aligns with what the object would like to convey, which Barthes defines as denotative meanings – literal meaning (Halley, 1982). In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes sees that understanding a picture requires several processes including what definition of a picture is, how the meaning of the picture works, how the picture is interpreted, both literally and figuratively, by its spectators (Sentilles, 2010). The literal-figurative / connotative-denotative interpretations are what Barthes further discusses in *Camera Lucida*.

Barthes's *tata pembermaknaan* process in this article will be accompanied by ideology reading of an object so it becomes myth as Fiske and Hartley offers in Key Concept in Communication and Cultural Studies (O'Sullivan, 1994).
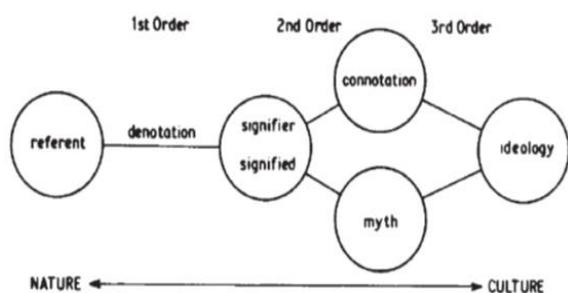
Figure 1: Processes of Signification by O'Sullivan (O'Sullivan, 1994).

Figure 1 summarizes the emphasis of Barthes's studium and punctum method. The first stage is denotation or what Fiske-Hartley and Saussure call as *signification*. The second stage is connotation that will be followed by ideology stage. The last stage happens when the interpretation is read with the analysis of the cultural discourse and values within society (O'Sullivan, 1994).

Ajidarma (2000) in his research *Kisah Mata: Fotography antara Dua Subjek: Perbincangan tentang Ada* discusses how a photograph is seen from the interpreting subject's perspective. Ajidarma sees that a picture is not value-free. There is something behind a photograph that functions as visual representation, for example, the way reading a photograph as a form of existence, a photograph as a part in making sense of the world, and the human position in reading a photography work, including the techniques in taking a photograph, for instance, the use of black and white, color texture and lens projection. The key in dissecting a photograph is in the photograph's details reading (Ajidarma, 2000). Ajidarma's research supports the author's argumentation in this research which is there is representation, there is branding, and there is another interpretation in the Putin's photograph selected as Time's cover.

Besides that, the author also reads the cover through a visual analysis of cultural studies by Theo Van Leeuwen and Jewitt. According to *Handbook of Visual Analysis*, in analyzing an image, there are some elements that need to be put into consideration. First, an image certainly contains public's perception and its own history. Second, an image cannot be analyzed without considering its production, distribution, and consumption in which the meanings are fluid and changing accordingly. Third, an image will always be entitled to the social process that constructs its 'story' and what the image presents. Fourth, in observing an image, there is visual subjectivity from its reader. Therefore, there is no

'neutrality' within an image (photograph / painting / poster).

In the following discussion, the author will analyze every part of Time's cover based on the categorization of the meaning of each detail.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Exclusivity of the Special Edition of Time

Before getting into the Putin's face analysis, the author will analyze the phrase '*subscriber copy not for sale*' on top of the cover.

Time uses this phrase to explain that this edition is an exclusive edition for its subscribers, who will get the copy if they choose to subscribe at least a year including the expensive shipping fees from the US. In studium sense, it just represents the subscriber edition only, while if it is analyzed through punctum approach, we can see a meaning of exclusivity. It conveys an exclusivity which represents a certain group of readers; the class it belongs to, it's interest in the US editorial, high income community from the assumption that only upper-middle class who is able to subscribe and has a mastery of English. These levels are ideological, containing puntum element related to its consumer's social class.

When we approach the cover through the visual analysis of cultural studies by Van Leeuwen and Jewitt, the analysis cannot be taken out of values and norms within the society since Time has a wide distribution. The Time's cover has its own historic narration in the society. Since we understand a picture through the visual analysis of cultural studies, the picture is interrelated with social and historical values, and the perspective of the society it targets (Van Leeuwen and Jewitt, 2000). The emphasizing of '*subscriber only*' is no longer neutral since it has a subjectivity value, which is an identity of 'loyal reader' that has been built by Time as a mechanism to classify its readers. Visually, the location in which 'subscriber only' is placed—exactly on top of TIME—also put a defining emphasize on exclusivity of the cover.

This aligns with punctum explanation of a photograph, even though it concentrates on a certain details, its understanding is also an interpretation of the whole photograph. Puntum reading does not pay attention to the photographer's purpose; instead it requires a reading on a certain detail of the photograph as an object that represents a particular

detail in it, related to values in the society, which is exclusivity.

On the other hand, if we pick Time in the newsstand, we will get a copy without the phrase. The three levels of exclusivity will vanish. In the context of visual analysis of cultural studies, how a certain image is placed, either in private space, exclusive space, or public space, has to be called into question in the process of analysis (Van Leeuwen and Jewitt, 2000). When Time decides to differentiate one edition—subscribers copy and retailer copy, the cover as a representation becomes more valid. This distinction between the two copies certainly has historical and social rationale. The neutrality within the picture has vanished by the time decides to have a significant distinction on its cover.

The studium element from '*subscriber only not for resale*' is simply a depiction of a subscriber exclusive edition, while the punctum element of the phrase is the exclusivity for official subscribers over common customer. Those who get the subscriber copy seemingly get the same exact copy as in the US edition without any censor. This argument is based on others editions, such as World edition, African edition and European edition in which the editorial narration will be the same since it is from the same editor. The distinction can be found simply in the cover (Hall, 2013). The analysis indicates that the US edition signified with the phrase "*exclusive for subscribers*" even though the subscribers are in another hemisphere, for instance, Indonesia, shows a hegemonic position in which if we subscribe to Time, we—as a subscriber—are co-opted and seen as though we have to accept the Time perspective of its Americanism and censor free cover. This conclusion comes from the understanding of studium, punctum, and ideology from the image's particular detail "*subscriber only not for resale*." Exclusivity, mastery of English, and the position as a subscriber in Indonesia that receives the US copy, not the Asia/Indonesia copy, which is free from Asian/Indonesian editorial filter generate a meaning that subscribers in Indonesia are forced to read the US copy of this edition.

3.2 Representation of Russia through Colors

The background of the cover—bright red around Putin's face gradually subsiding to a darker color of red to even black—has a certain meaning that can be analyzed. By its studium, this background color can be interpreted simply as a color variation. The accentuation of the red color near Putin's face can

artlessly be read as a device to make his face appearing clearly, while the darker accent in the top part of the cover is due to TIME's red typeface that can be seen easily if the background is dark or black.

If we punctum-approach the background, we are presented with more meanings. For Russians, the color red is closely associated with beauty (Mikheev, 2013). Red is frequently used in relation to the state, for example, "Red Bear", "communist" state, "Red Square", and "Red Army". Initially, Russian vocabulary *krasnij* has beauty denotation but it undergoes a semantic change in which it shifts its meaning to Red (the Russian Dictionary, http://dic.academic.ru/dic.nsf/enc2p/258886).

Therefore, Russia is identical with Red color. The accentuation of red around the figure of Putin can be interpreted as an argument that Putin is a part of the redness, which is a part of Russia. According to *Handbook of Visual Analysis*, an image/picture/photograph is related to historical context and social discourse constructed by it. The Time's emphasis on the color of red and the figure of Putin is in order to put more emphasis that Putin is Russia. Next, the trademark writing of TIME put at the top of the cover is red surrounded by black. This can indicate that this edition feels like showing a dominant red color—a color that is identical with Russia and later navigates Putin's identity as the representation of Russia.

3.3 Construction of Putin's Image as an 'Aging' Leader

The next stage of analysis is the analysis of Putin photograph in the cover. The photograph is Putin smiling, without any of his teeth showing. It shows clearly the receding hairline and wry smile. In the dichotomy of western media and Russian media, there is a significant differentiation in the brands of Putin's identity construction. In the western media, the constructed discourses on Putin identity are as a bad man, seducer/tempter/teaser, intruder of the stability of western countries, and a feminine representation behind his macho narration (Bjelica, 2014). This contradicts the identity of Putin constructed by Russian media which is a figure with the quality of machismo, strong, economy builder, and a 'father' to the Russian nation (Bjelica, 2014).

Putin figure on the cover is put with a darkening red background. The denotative meaning is artlessly a smiling man; no matter who the figure is—a president or anyone else—the denotative meaning being communicated is simply a man smiling. Through the analysis of Barthes's studium-punctum, we could decode another underlying meaning behind

this photograph of smiling Putin. By its studium analysis of the photograph, it shows Putin smiling signifying Putin is in the state of happiness. Putin wearing suit and tie depicts an elegant figure, likewise the politicians in the U.S. The discourse of American politicians needs to be disclosed as a way to understand a photograph/picture/image in the cultural studies approach presented in *Handbook of Visual Analysis*. In this approach, the targeted social context of a represented photograph/picture/image has to be put into consideration. Here to fore, the argument behind Putin wearing suit and tie needs to be analyzed and elaborated since if Putin appears in another clothing, for example, shirt or T-shirt, the image of him as a politician will not appear as strong.

In this stage, if we understand the punctum element of the picture, we will convey more underlaying meanings. The first thing is Putin's hair. The element of his receding hairline can be interpreted as Putin getting older. The photograph clearly portrays his hair loss on top of his head, while the hair on the sides of his head can still be observed. This confirms Bjelica's argument in which Putin, in western/the U.S. media, is not depicted as a perfect figure as in Russian media. Putin is portrayed with weaknesses. While Bjelica argues that the attenuation of Putin's figure articulates through hidden feminine side, the author suggests that the attenuation is encoded through his aging figure. Putin is not impeccable, macho, and strong because he seems getting older in this edition.

Time wants to portray Putin as a president that is no longer in his youth. Besides the receding hairline, what the cover puts more emphasis on are clear wrinkles in his forehead and temples. Denotatively, these wrinkles are the signifier that an individual has naturally been growing older. In understanding its studium, even though the wrinkles could be covered though photo editing, Time instead exhibits them explicitly. Time wants to portray Putin just the avenue that he is, in studium perspective Time is a weekly that it is, without any editing at all. Dismantling details of a photograph, including angle, lens projection, face lines portrayal, and make up details are important parts in a photography analysis (Ajidarma, 2000). Certainly, with this argument, the detail exhibition of Putin's photograph cannot be left alone.

Through punctum approach, based on Ajidarma's detail focusing argument and Bjelica's discourse analysis, we could dismantle different meanings from this photograph with wrinkles. The wrinkles are emphasized under an intention that Putin is a figure who is not immune to time. With this portrayal, the

Time's readers are expected to be more relaxed. The tendency related to Putin photograph, similar to the photographs of Russian leaders commonly published by state-owned news agencies in which to present portrayal of the leaders who always look young and strong without any aging indicator is a phenomenon that does not change from the communism era of Soviet Union to today's Russian Federation. With the exhibition of the wrinkles, on his both temples and forehead, an image of old Putin is explicitly observed. The power over Russia he has is expiring, considering his old age.

When the edition published, Putin is already 64 years old whereas the first time he was elected as the President of Russia, he was only 47 years old. It is also an interpretation that young figure for Putin image is no longer relevant. Russian news agencies, such as RT and RIA *Novosti*, always circulate elegant photographs of Putin and do not highlight the clear aging reflecting on his body, which are poles apart with what the Time's cover depicts. The portrayal of aging Putin, relating it to the issue of the US presidential election during which the edition is published, basically resembles a portrayal of one candidate, which is Donald Trump. Interestingly, with the cover of this edition, Time seemingly navigates its readers to linkages between Putin and Trump, mainly from a figure of aging elderly male figure.

4 CONCLUSIONS

Based on the analysis in each stage, we can clearly see a discourse of Putin as a figure representing Russia and an old man identity. Although it is not explicit, the visual analysis of this cover suggests a partiality to a certain party, which is Republican Party—Donald Trump. Mainstream media—in this case is Time—is found to have a pro-Trump tendency. However, the partiality is not explicitly and obviously stated. It is very smooth and subtle in articulating its partiality to Trump. Through its Putin presenting cover, which is published exactly a month prior to electoral vote, Time appears as one of the media that is subtle to convey its partiality to Trump and Putin.

One of the avenues of Time's partiality to Putin-Trump that has been decoded thorough stadium-punctum analysis is the depiction of a figure—aging, white, conservative—conformable to Donald Trump figure. How an aging figure of Putin still able to intervene the democratic administration constructs a meaning that Putin—an old man can interfere the

U.S. Government. Therefore, Time seemingly suggests that a proper figure worthy to vote by the U.S. citizens is a Putin-like figure, which is depicted to be able to interfere foreign party and intervene foreign government, and basically becomes an antithesis of democratic government who, when the edition is published, is still running the administration. In this edition, the subtle representation of the government—Democratic administration—Barrack Obama—Hillary Clinton—appears weak and not decent for the U.S. so it is not appropriate to vote the democrats. This is proven by the Trump's victory as the elected President of the U.S. and the massive victory of Republican Party in the senate.

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