

In Between Light

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Restatement of the research problem and methodology

Film, as an art form and mass media is a powerful tool in documenting and influencing societies not only in Asia but also all over the world. The moving image plays an integral role not only in artistic expression but also in delivering messages ranging from the deeply personal to broader social concerns. In the rapidly changing contexts of Asia, filmmaking has also continuously evolved. One of these important developments is the emergence of experimental cinema, a hitherto unknown form of capturing moving images that utilizes techniques and approaches that differ from mainstream or mass produced films. As a response to the demands of documenting and commenting on society, this art form has also slowly gained ground in most Asian countries. However, its marginalized character makes it inaccessible due to limitations of distribution and exhibition.

This research project aims to address the need for research on the topic of experimental cinema in the context of Asian countries. Specifically, it aims to document and analyze the range of Indonesian Experimental Film and Video and how the socio-economic-political events have affected the art form produced then and now. This entails identifying and comparing historical experimental films with the current state of Indonesian experimental films. To achieve this goal involves studying the introduction of experimental cinematic works, the techniques used, their inspirations and motivations, the socio-economic-political influences that affect them and conversely, their influences on the other artistic disciplines.

This artistic and academic endeavor addresses the following research questions:

1. How is experimental cinema defined in the Indonesian context?
2. What are the characteristics of experimental films and filmmaking prior to the 1998 New Order political movement in Indonesia and afterwards?
3. What are the motivations and experiences of noted Indonesian experimental filmmakers in pursuing their craft?
4. What are the characteristics of Indonesian film communities and how do they impact experimental film making in the country (including exhibition and distribution)?
5. What are the current concerns that need to be addressed to support or improve experimental cinema in the Indonesian context?
6. What are the prospects of Indonesian experimental cinema for the future?

The project's significance lies in its being a pioneering effort in documenting the characteristics, influences, and roles of experimental films in the Indonesian context. The undertaking of the research provides a venue for dialogue between experimental film/video practitioners and scholars (Malaysian and Indonesian), as well as between varying disciplines (film/video, visual arts, and performance). This research also provides impetus for further

discussions towards creating and innovating new cinematic languages in Asian cinema, particularly in South East Asia.

At a more personal level, the research provides the author/artist a vehicle for exposure to a wider variety of methodologies that are involved in pushing the boundaries of the cinematic image in the Asian context. At the same time, it allows for a cross-cultural (Malaysian and Indonesian) comparison of the myriad of interpretations of what 'experimental film/video' is in the two countries. Thus, the project provides a "learning opportunity" for the author/artist on the infinite possibilities of defining experimental works that is unique to the region. This exchange can help enhance the scope of Asian Studies in the media arts field, through exchange of knowledge and experience in filmmaking between Malaysia and Indonesia.

Research Methodology

Data for this research was gathered primarily through videotaped semi-structured interviews with Indonesian experimental filmmakers, film scholars, and other local stakeholders. Twenty- three interviews were formally conducted and videotaped. The interviews were conducted with key experimental cinema stakeholders in three major Indonesian cities namely Jakarta, Bandung and Yogyakarta. These sites are also epicenters for recent spurts of activities in experimental filmmaking. An original plan to also conduct interviews with Bali was not pursued primary due to logistical concerns.

In addition, secondary data sources were also utilized. The author conducted a review of documents, articles, press info, etc. on the topic of interest. Site visits (artists' workplaces, watering holes, galleries, screening facilities) were also conducted to provide first hand validation of interview accounts. Lastly, representative works of the filmmakers interviewed were also viewed, documented, and analyzed. A listing of these works (with short descriptions) can be found in the Appendix.

Results, Discussion and Analysis

Experimental cinema defined in the Indonesian context

A study on experimental cinema necessarily requires a definition of what it really is. This specifically demands an explanation as to how experimental cinema is different from popular or mainstream cinema. Is the genre defined by the technology used (celluloid is mainstream, digital is experimental), target audience (national distribution for mainstream, select audiences for experimental) or the approach used (conventional narrative storytelling approaches for mainstream, and alternative non-linear storytelling approaches for experimental films)? Is the difference based on film length (short films are experimental), the importance of financial returns for a film, or the presence of well-known movie personalities? As societies change, so do filmmakers, technology, and the audiences. In many

parts of the world, the lines that demarcate mainstream from experimental films are getting more and more blurred. Many mainstream filmmakers now infuse alternative techniques into their productions. Big name superstars sometimes appear on these supposedly experimental films, helping these films reach a wider audience. Adding another layer to the argument, how are experimental films different from digital films, short films, or even moving images made as part of a music video?

Indonesian filmmakers also share the dilemma. Alex Sihar of Konfiden shared that *“From past experience we realize it is difficult to define what is experimental. The difficulty comes from the fact that everyone uses experimentation, whether they are in the production method, visual forms or narrative style, structure wise and so on. In addition, our basic approach to experimental cinema is through new, non-established technical approach.”*ⁱ However, he also commented that the definition of experimental cinema as something that uses different approaches from established techniques could be confusing in the Indonesian context. This is because there is actually no single established technique in Indonesian filmmaking that can be definitely called mainstream.

Overall, experimental film making in Indonesia can best be defined not as a technique but rather a belief. It follows the spirit of perpetually redefining what a moving image should entail. As shared by the Indonesian filmmakers interviewed, it is constantly changing. One can never exactly identify what an experimental film is EXCEPT that it is something that people have never seen before. It may also be something you are familiar with but re-invented in a different context. Essentially, conventional film/video is the same as experimental film/video in the fact that it is still a ‘viewed’ medium – an audience sits (or stands in a gallery or public space) to view the moving images. The difference between conventional and experimental is essentially the treatment of that time and space.

Characteristics of experimental films and filmmaking in Indonesia

The Development of Experimental Films in Indonesia

According to Lisabona Rahman, the development of (experimental) films actually dates back to the 1970s, but it had not been very popular until the late 1990s. There is wide acceptance that experimental filmmaking began in Institut Kesenian Jakarta (IKJ), the only film school in Indonesia. Lulu Ratna, founder of Boemboe, an organization that focuses on distribution and exhibition of short independent film/video works, shares, *“In IKJ during the 1970s, they learned about European films and filmmaking, etc. There are some filmmakers who made experimental films such as Gotot Prakosa. Then those filmmakers became lecturers at IKJ and then they have students who made experimental films.”* In an interview, filmmaker and IKJ lecturer, Gotot Prakosa, acknowledged as one of the earliest makers of Indonesian experimental films, commented that the 1970s up to 80s were relatively lonely times because there were not a lot of filmmakers during that period. But IKJ became the breeding ground for emerging filmmakers. That is where he met and got inspired by D. Jayakusuma, one of the founders of IKJ. In the periods following the 80s, more and more got involved in filmmaking. This led Prakosa to become more involved in festival forums and

other film related activities. The process of filmmaking was very expensive then. The absence of digital technology made it difficult for Indonesian filmmakers to join local and foreign competitions. Nevertheless, films were being produced and shown all over the country.

The periods before and after the 1998 New Order political movement in Indonesia

The political events in the early 1990s dampened the impetus to create films that comment on society. During the time of the New Order, *“...all cultural products were co-opted by the state”*, according to Agus Mediarta of Konfiden. His colleague Alex Sihar added *“All the film activities that took place immediately after 1998 are illegal because this is against a regulation that was still in existence during that time. Festivals were also illegal. Regulations have to be followed.”* Daniel Rudi Haryanto of Cinema Society further commented that *“If the actual regulations were followed, producers and filmmakers like Garin Nugroho, Mira Lesmana, and others are all doing illegal activities.”*

Overall, the respondents shared that in general the environment for filmmaking before 1998 was oppressive and not conducive to the creation of innovative film works. Things changed after 1998 when films were given more creative latitude. And as an immediate reaction to the times, these films spoke bluntly about politics, which was previously impossible to do. Ade Darmawan was blunt when he shared *“Before we could not say ‘F___ you’ and now we can say that, but we don’t know who to say f___ you to.”*

Experimental filmmaking has slowly re-emerged and developed after the political turmoil that besieged the country. According to Lisabona Rahman, *“That’s (meaning years 2000 and beyond) when Indonesian short films started to get awards. Actually international film festivals are the main exhibition forums for short films until the end of the 1990s. When the independent community started growing, they collected films and organized road shows. More people went to see different kind of films, which led to more people motivated to produce it. The development has been quite amazing actually. There is 60-70 short films produced in say, end of the 90s and now there is about 250 short films produced in a year that I know of.”*

Starting from 1998 onwards, more and more people from diverse backgrounds went into filmmaking. There was an increase in interest for film as an art form. The emergence of digital technology with smaller cameras made filmmaking more convenient and less costly. There was a general surge of film production which further spurred on artists to experiment with the medium more often. A new generation of filmmakers emerged.

Elida Tamalagi gave her insights on what happened afterwards. *“Since 2003, I suppose, people started making films that narrated not from A to Z. Video art began to get recognition. By 2004, there was a phenomenon where clubs emerged with video projections. Their emergence demanded a profession called the VJ (Video Jockey). This brought about new influences, so people started to make video art in a ‘VJ’ style. VJs started to cut and*

paste films that they applied to the discotheque in combination with the rhythms of the music.”

Another important development that supported the tremendous growth of Indonesian experimental/short films is the creation of local festivals that serve as venues for local exhibitions. Lulu Ratna commented, *“After the first JIFFest (Jakarta International Film Festival) and FFVII (Festival Film Video Independen Indonesia, which was later called Festival Filem Pendek Konfiden) in 1999, suddenly everyone had their own choices. People have their own choices of film other than what they usually see in the cinema. People also have the choice to make films which they can screen. FFVII screens all films that are sent to us.”*

Passing on the Torch -- Three Generations of Experimental Film Makers in IKJ

As previously described, the IKJ is the only dedicated film school in Indonesia. There have been strong experimental filmmakers that come from IKJ. Gotot Prakosa started the tradition, passing it on to Faozan Rizal who passed it on to Edwin. All three are prominent figures in Indonesian experimental filmmaking. Essentially, their relationships indicate that the motivation, starting as a fire of interest within, was further fanned and developed from teacher to student. This allows for knowledge, skills, and hopefully, passion to be transferred to the next generations. The “transfer of experimental film knowledge and motivation” is summarized below.

PAST	Gotot Prakosa -- Pioneer of Indonesian experimental films
↓	
PRESENT	Faozan Rizal – Prominent filmmaker with an international reputation
↓	
FUTURE	Edwin – young filmmaker with strong convictions and a guerilla style

Gotot Prakosa of Jakarta is one of the “founding fathers” of Indonesian short and experimental films. He was inspired by the filmmaker Jayakusuma who was his teacher at IKJ. Jayakusuma was also one of the founders of IKJ. In the 70s, he made a noted film about *wayang* which was derived from traditional roots. His stories were adopted from East Java, most of which are taken from folk performances such as tableaus from the Padang region. Gotot studied in an art school in Yogyakarta for 3 years and trained as a painter, specializing in modern graphic art. He chose filmmaking as a career later on because for him, film offered something different from the other visual arts. He admits that making paintings still affected the form of the films he created. He believes that shifting from painting to film is merely a technology-- from brush to camera, and from camera to screen.

Faozan Rizal, a prominent experimental filmmaker based in Jakarta, was directly influenced by Gotot. *“I was studying painting at IKJ but then I met Mr. Gotot and he said that you can also learn painting in film school, “What do you mean, I said. We are painting with light... he said. And I started catching the idea of painting with light. That would be so nice, then I change my faculty from fine arts to film school. So the idea for me is to how to*

make my paintings into movies. I started making films for Indonesia, not only films that people can understand the story but films that you have to see, like reading between the lines.”

Edwin is considered one of Jakarta’s film renegades. He is a prolific artist with a notable track record of popular short films to his credit. In his interview, Edwin shared that *“When I graduated high school in 1996, I continued to study in Surabaya, in graphic design for 3 years. Actually, since I graduated, I had full intentions to continue studying in film school. Then I met Pao at my second year at IKJ when he returned from France. When we met, he showed me his works. I thought, his films are very different. In IKJ, we always talk about narrative films. Films that have rules. We have an introduction of character in the first sequence, followed by the second, third and so on. I feel that filmmaking can be more exciting, free and not too boring. Actually I was just playing around. In most of my films, I always play with backgrounds, words. I conceptualize it as a poem which is based on reality. With my film KARA, half of the movie shot in poetic forms, using beautiful scenes of Semeru Mountain and all that. Then we contrast it in our own reality, how we have to struggle against capitalism using video. The little kid in the film represents all of us, how Indonesian people respond to capitalism. At one time, we are disturbed by it and in another, we are okay with it. It’s a very useless act. Terrorism is no match for capitalism. It’s impossible.”*

The vignettes presented show that the mentor-mentee system is one of the ways how new Indonesian filmmakers develop and get to later on be known in their craft. In terms of motivation, there were several -- inspiration from other filmmakers, acknowledgement of an inherent visual talent, family influence and many others. Like in other professions, Indonesian experimental filmmakers are guided toward their chosen field through the coming together of several factors, both external and internal.

Characteristics of Indonesian Film Communities

The ‘Gerakan’ or Movements of Experimental Films in Indonesia has been affected by changes in the social context where they operate. Alex Sihar shared that the development of the Indonesian Film Industry is supported by the community movement in Indonesia. Community-based activities and formation of groups of film enthusiasts were encouraged. The film dissemination that took place in 1999 is what is actually supporting the current industry. He further noted, *“[T]hus these small communities have so much potential. Indeed that is to say, it has become an effective way for distribution... discussion and also the spreading of the idea. And these communities could not be controlled by the big capital.”* Lulu Ratna added, *“The film communities are important in this way. They are the data center. They become the first contact for people who have no information about short films. So usually people say that Jakarta is where all the exposure began. It is very fast. Actually it’s quite the same in Bandung except that it’s just that it’s more inward than outward. While Jakarta’s fault line is more fluid while Yogyakarta is moving even deeper. Outside influences enter more slowly.”*

Jakarta, Bandung and Yogyakarta are three of Indonesia's most prominent cities. They are also collective witnesses to the emergence of experimental filmmaking in the country. As hinted above, there are differences in these three regions in terms of the filmmaker's works, influences and other realities.

Experimental Cinema in Indonesia: Current Concerns

In spite of the growing number of loosely defined experimental films being produced in Indonesia (from 60 to 70 films existing in the late 1990's to about 250 to 300 short films produced in a year by mid-2000), there are still many concerns that need to be addressed to support and further develop the film form. The main concern identified by the interviewees is the difficulty associated with the exhibition and distribution of experimental films. Having higher numbers of films produced does not guarantee that many people could access and watch it. Independent filmmakers, lacking in support and back-up, find it difficult to present their works to a larger number of people.

The "wild and free" nature of Indonesian experimental films reflects achievements in terms of the current political climate and social support. However, there remains a problem in terms of archiving and documenting the works. There is apparently a lack of institution or system that systematically gathers these films for posterity. Ade Darmawan (Ruang Rupa artist collective) lamented *"How can we make good critiques (of the films) if there's not enough documentation? We are still in a state of euphoria of creating and producing. We tend to disregard about the importance of media and critics as infrastructure. There should be (more) local festivals, institutions, screening rooms and theatres. Physical infrastructures and distribution facilities are not yet complete. This explains why it is always disrupted. We move to a certain point and stop to return again to zero."*

In addition, the interviewees have noticed a decline in the "push" to further promote experimental films among younger generations. Given the existence of varied options for careers that often pay more than filmmaking, lesser people may actually join the industry to carry on the work for future generations. Lulu Ratna defined this as a problem of regeneration. She adds, *"The regeneration process is also not working in Indonesia. Regeneration is when one generation is not active anymore... and passed their information to the newer ones. That's why many (film) communities are breaking up. Many of its members move on, get married and have children. But since there is no information of what had been done in the past, the later ones (artists) have to start again from zero."* This also leads to experimental film production being "monopolized" by a very few select group... somewhat an oligarchy of filmmakers. Lisabona Rahman clarified *"Sadly film watching culture is dying basically because the cinema is monopolized"*

In summary, the main problems identified by the interviewees being faced by the industry are:

1. Inadequate infrastructure for distribution and marketing
2. Lack of facilities for exhibitions

3. Lack of systematic archiving and documentation
4. Weak support for regeneration of new filmmakers

Perhaps a strategy to address the first two concerns regarding distribution and exhibition could be addressed by KINOKI in Yogyakarta. With a slogan of *Bukan Bioskop, Bukan Coffeeshop* (Not a Cinema, not a Coffee Shop), this restaurant-cum-exhibition space is a venue for artists to showcase their works and for aficionados to enjoy experimental films on a regular basis, outside of mainstream movie houses (CINEMA 21).

Future prospects of Indonesian Experimental Cinema

The development of experimental films in Indonesia has generally gained speed from year 2000 onwards. More and more experimental films are being developed. As Indonesian artists gain more ground through their receiving more international and local exposure, there are high hopes that the trend of development will continue. There is a need to address the existing challenges through a collective effort from those directly involved in the communities (filmmakers, exhibitors, programmers, academics, journalists, etc) and also from government and private sector groups as well.

Indonesian experimental filmmaking shows strength and vitality as an alternative medium for artistic expression and social commentary within the industry of conventional cinema. Its importance has been acknowledged by local enthusiasts and academics. Budi Irawanto of UGM provides an overall analysis of the importance of experimental films in Indonesian society. *“Through experimental films, we are not only celebrating the spirit of playing around, but also a way out from stereotypes in seeing films as mediums of narration and so on. This indicates that the spirit of freedom still exists. But if there is a place where no experimental works are to be found, then I have a suspicion that such a place will not guarantee the overall freedom of expression for the society. “*

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APPENDICES

1. List of Experimental Films Reviewed

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| a. <i>Wayang Kancil</i> (Susilo, 2006) | b. <i>Genesis</i> (Prakosa, 1981) |
| c. <i>Jalur</i> (Prakosa, 1977) | d. <i>Yasujiro’s Journey</i> (Rizal, 2004) |
| e. <i>Aries</i> (Rizal, 2004) | f. <i>Dajang Soembi Perempoean</i>
<i>Jang Dikawini Andjing</i> (Edwin, 2004) |
| g. <i>A Very Slow Breakfast</i> (Edwin, 2002) | h. <i>I’ll Buy U Time</i> (Fitriani, 2006) |
| i. <i>Can’t Find You</i> (Fitriani, 2006) | j. <i>Dream Such A Monster</i> (Osman, 2006) |
| k. <i>The Killers</i> (Osman, 2005) | l. <i>Karena Cinta Kami Begini</i> (Wimo, 2005) |
| m. <i>Once Upon A Time In China</i> (Wimo, 2006) | |
| n. <i>No</i> (Wimo, 2006) | |

2. Supplemental Video:

DI ANTARA CAHAYA/ In Between Light sets out to discover the cinematic experimentation in Indonesia. With over 90 films/video communities throughout the country, this documentary examine show alternative cinema emerged from the tumultuous period of the 1998 Reformation and the subsequent release of ideas.

DI ANTARA CAHAYA/ In Between Light is a documentary which frames cinema outside of the conventional filmmaking in Indonesia. Through a broad range of interviews with academics, press programmers, producers, distributors, and exhibitors, this documentary weaves a series of discussions with a variety of profiles of each artist throughout Indonesia.

Author's profiles and clips of their work are also included. Artists such as: Bini Fitriani, Edwin, Faozan Rizal, Gatot Susilo (V) Latex), Prakosa, Osman Laurs Oscar, and Witmo A. Bayang.

With soundtracks from Elisa Rose and the Furious Pink and Punkasila

3. Film Descriptions (notes):

LULU: European style, conceptual, lyrical, public spaces

EDWIN: stylized, conscientious, refined, and deliberate.

FAOZAN RIZAL: Painterly style, and rooted in movements.

GOTOT: animation, organic, from painting

WIMO: playful, outsider, rock music, from photography,

OSMAN: dark, ominous, lonely

BINI : peaceful, yet lonely, thoughtful

GATOT: excitable, hyper personality,

HARRY DAGOE: 1 film only but before 1998 – children's violence.

ⁱ Italicized quotes are direct quotes translated from the Indonesia national language