

Developments and Movements of New Indonesian Film

After President Suharto's stepping down on 21 May 1998, the medium of film in Indonesia has come to be used in new ways. At the time, a great euphoria of freedom and reform was felt among the Indonesian people. The spirit of reform permeated into the world of Indonesian film and propelled an accelerating sense of freedom of expression and creativity. In this ambience individuals and groups began to critically review the signification of audio-visual media in Indonesia, and to (re-)formulate the ways on how to use those media. On 15 March 2002 a seminar about recent developments and upcoming movements in modern Indonesian film was organized by the Indonesian Mediations Project (IMP) and the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS) at Leiden University.



Photo of Ibrahim Kadir, a famous poet of *didong* (a traditional form of poetry in central Aceh) and political prisoner during the hunt for communists in Indonesia in 1965.

By Katinka van Heeren

One of the new developments in the world of Indonesian film is that few film makers in Indonesia set out to address the issues of human rights, social change, propaganda, and globalization. An organization that critically examines and addresses broad social topics within the Indonesian context through film is the Foundation of Science Esthetics and Technology, (Yayasan Sains Estetika dan Teknologi, SET), headed by Mr Garin Nugroho, one of Indonesia's leading veteran film makers. A new division of this foundation, Ragam, is set up as a centre for Multicultural Understanding that designs multimedia programmes for multicultural education, and organizes training sessions of film making for NGO's in Indonesia. SET, and in particular, Ragam, are exploring the possibilities of film to assist to end conflicts based on clashes of culture in Indonesia.

Another novelty in the world of Indonesian film after the fall of Suharto is the genesis of new movements. The advance of those movements is not only due to the improved political climate of the reform period, but, importantly, is also based on the wide availability of new audio-visual media for both the recording and screening of films. One element of the new film movements is the rise of the label of independence, or film Independen (film indie) (independent film), which has become a model and banner for many of the young in Indonesia to make their own films. A key organization of film Independen is Konfiden (Komunitas Film Independen, Community of Independent Film) which in 1999 began to hold a series of film screenings and discussions of films (*diskusi keliling*, wandering discussions) at different educational institutions, cultural venues, and foreign cultural centers in the bigger cities of Java. The objective of these 'keliling' sessions was to introduce the concept of independent film to a wider public as well as promote and shape a conducive atmosphere for the first Indonesian Independent Film and Video Festival (FFVII), which was held in Jakarta at the end of October 1999. Besides the responsibility for organizing the FFVII, which since 1999 has been held annually, Konfiden runs workshops for film making, and publishes a monthly bulletin. At present it is developing a cinema laboratory as a training center for starting film makers.

Two guests of these organizations, Mr Aryo Danusiri, a documentary- and ethnographic filmmaker, and head of the division of Ragam, at SET foundation, and Ms Lulu Ratna

one of the founders and key persons of Konfiden, were invited to the IMP/IIAS seminar to talk about their activities and discuss current issues in the world of film in Indonesia. Ratna gave an outline of the history of film in Indonesia, and in that context, the role of film Independen and the organization Konfiden. She emphasized that the movement of film Independen is mainly based on the passion and enthusiasm of the young in Indonesia to make films. Even though Konfiden depends on that passion and on the private funding of members of the organization, she believes that the movement of film Independen is not just a trend which will soon disappear, since it has already found its way to an international scene. For example, Konfiden has promoted the screening of Indonesian (independent) films at international film festivals in Oberhausen, Germany, Tampere, Finland and at a cultural festival in Rotterdam, the Netherlands. In future Konfiden wants to continue to raise the awareness of the existence of independent Indonesian films abroad as well as encourage alliances, and the screening of films from other countries in Indonesia which are not likely to be screened through the existing networks of distribution and exhibition. These networks are marked as business monopolies that form a legacy of the political, and economic structures of the former Suharto rule.

The second guest of the seminar, Mr Aryo Danusiri, gave a presentation about the activities of SET foundation in the world of Indonesian film, and his work at Ragam within the context of film as a multicultural medium. He addressed issues of presentation and representation of the different Indonesian cultures in film and documentaries of SET foundation. One of the problems he encounters in his work is the choice in style of the films that have to cater to the presumed tastes of audiences in a commercial sense and at the same time trying to get across the underlying message of multicultural education. Particularly interesting were his remarks on what he calls 'mystical multiculturalism', which is the use of multicultural symbols through old stereotypes or myths of cultural particulars, which are presented as positive aspects of those cultures, but in fact are nothing more than stigmas or hegemonic interpretations of these, which were formulated during the years of the reign of ex President Suharto.

The morning session and presentations by Ratna and Danusiri were closed with the screening of the short film *Di Antara Masa Lalu dan Masa Sekarang* (Between the Past and the Present), directed by Eddie Cahyono. This film pictures the memoir of an old man of the Indonesian struggle for Independence in 1949, and was meant as a teaser for the afternoon session in which more films were screened. The afternoon session of the IMP/IIAS seminar started with the showing of a selection of short films from the past independent film festivals of Konfiden. These were amongst other *Revolusi Harapan* (Revolution of Hope), by Nanang Istiabudi. A film which does depict a surrealistic story about a gang which on command goes out killing and pulling teeth out of artists, students, and other people who speak up or are in one way or another critical of what happens around them. The trailer of the film *Beth* by Aria Kusumadewa, a film which



Photo of Ibrahim Kadir.

represents typical figures and issues of modern Indonesian society through a love story which is located in a mental institution. *Da Pupu Project* by Adit, a humoristic animation film about the extermination of endangered species. And *Topeng Kekasih* (Dearest Mask), directed by Hanung Bramantyo, is dealing with a Javanese Oedipus complex, and the problems of choices by a young man between modern Western lifestyle and his roots in Javanese tradition.

Subsequently, one of the ethnographic documentaries directed by Aryo Danusiri, *Penyair Negeri Ligne* (The Poet of Ligne Homeland) was shown. This documentary is a portrait of the political prisoner and poet Ibrahim Kadir, and of *didong*, the traditional form of poetry in central Aceh. The day ended with the screening of the feature film *Viva Indonesia / Letter to God*, an anthology of five films by four directors Ravi L. Bharwani, Aryo Danusiri, Lianto Luseno, and Nana Mulyana, produced by SET Foundation. The story of the film is about the lives of five children in Indonesia and the social, political, and cultural problems they encounter within their surroundings. The film aims to form a kind of memoir of the multi-dimensional crises that arose in Indonesia since the Asian monetary crisis of 1997 and the fall of president Suharto in the following year. *Viva Indonesia / Letter to God* had its European premiere at the IMP/IIAS seminar.

Maybe not as a surprise it became very clear, both from the presentations of Mr Aryo Danusiri and Ms Lulu Ratna, and the screening of films which were recently produced in Indonesia, that the contemporary developments and rise of new movements in the world of Indonesian film, as well as the content of films produced today, cannot be separated from the substantial social and political changes and turmoil the country is currently experiencing. Issues in the world of film concerning production, distribution, screening, content, and discourse on the subject, reflect historical and cultural nuances particular in relation to the environment in which they take place. At this point in time in Indonesia the topics related to film are still controlled by questions as to how to deal with the legacy of the former Suharto regime. <



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Ibrahim Kadir, the main character of the documentary *The Poet of the Linge Homeland*, directed by Aryo Danusiri.

More info >

Additional information about this project can be found on the websites:
<http://www.iias.nl/host/imp>
<http://www.knaw.nl/indonesia> (under the heading: 'Indonesia in Transition')