



Filmmakers' aesthetic strategy against the politics of taste of European film festivals

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Abstract

European film festivals today are not only exhibitors but also film producers and distributors. Festivals perform these roles by providing funding for films created by Third World filmmakers through separate bodies set up for such a purpose. Such funding programs often come with strings attached. Unequal power relations between First World film festivals, as benefactors, and Third World filmmakers, as beneficiaries, often exist. This ultimately promotes a politics of taste at film festivals. These festivals are believed to have extensive power to select the films that qualify for funding. Furthermore, the compromises and negotiation between filmmakers and film festivals are cause for concern. This article examines the aesthetic strategies of funded Indonesian filmmakers in response to the politics of taste in film festivals. Following a textual and visual approach, this study found that, although Indonesian filmmakers cannot completely break free from the dominant politics of taste of film festivals, they are capable of negotiating their positions and offering different kinds of aesthetics. This study also presents Indonesian filmmakers as active and flexible agents in the international film industry, despite their position as beneficiaries restricted by the rules of their benefactors.

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Introduction

Foreign funding and accompanying hegemony have always been part of Indonesia's film history. In the 1950s, the United States provided financial support to assist the development of Indonesia's film industry through the TCA (Technical Cooperation Administration) program (Van Heeren, 2012), which had quite a large impact on the Indonesian films created during this era. The films produced in this era stuck to a certain formula that consisted of chaos or disaster in a village followed by a resolution and the restoration of stability through the help of a competent external agent as a pro-development hero who comes to the village to teach villagers how to become

modern (Van Heeren, 2012). Similarly, funding provided by European film festivals has also had an impact on the films created by the beneficiaries of the funds. Notably, there is pressure that the themes that the beneficiaries pursue should align with the agenda of the film festival, as stated by Randall Halle (2010).

Several points can be concluded from previous studies on the funding that flows from European film festivals to Third World countries: (1) there are lingering Orientalist fantasies that prompt practices of self-exoticization and perpetuate East–West stereotypes, (2) First World–Third World stereotypes are perpetuated through poverty exploitation, and (3) the selected films align with European agendas. Thus, the question stated earlier, regarding the type of stories expected by European audiences, can begin to be answered.

Orientalism and First World–Third World dynamics operate along the same dimension: a binary opposition along an axis of superiority and inferiority, that is, West–East and

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rich–poor. Orientalism is an ideological construct concerning the East, in which its characteristics are defined through a contrast with the West (Amin, 2009). Said (2010) found Orientalism to be nothing more than a form of legitimization of Western superiority over Eastern inferiority. The orientalist tradition is a way to understand the Eastern world based on using forms of exoticism constructed from a European perspective. In cinema, exoticization operates through the production of alluring images resembling postcard pictures, arranged to fulfill fantasies about the barbarian and the primitive man (Dovey, 2015).

Likewise, the dichotomy of the First–Third World also expresses stereotypes of the rich and the poor. The stereotypes associated with the Third World stigma include lack of education, poverty, incompetence, and wretchedness (Kennedy & Hill, 2010). Such exotic depictions and Third World stereotypes are found in the films that receive festival funding, which are also aligned with Europe's agenda of fighting regimes of oppression, censorship, and injustice, as well as serving as a beacon for values associated with humanity, freedom, and protection for the marginalized. Europe's agenda continues to operate within the West–East framework, in its film festivals, as the West constructs itself as a safe creative space.

Halle (2010) argued that the donors tended to give funds to films and filmmakers that aligned their tastes with European political agenda (2010, p. 314). This is supported by Mubarak, who stated

“The films that they funded all contained European political correctness, so if for instance we came up with questioning their political correctness, they wouldn't likely be funded. Because they considered Indonesia a country with a heavy load lot of political incorrectness, it would then be imperative for them to aid those filmmakers to convey universal values.” (*personal communication with Mubarak-authors' translation*).

Political correctness covers a wide range of definitions, from respect for other human beings to accepting and promoting diversity (Hughes, 2010). European political correctness would include, among others, gender equality, anti-racism, anti-xenophobia, respect for cultural, religious, and linguistic diversities, and anti-discrimination (Midgley, 2017).

Freedom of speech is also part of the film festivals' political agenda. Iwana Chronis, a former manager of Hubert Bals Fund, affirmed that one of the reasons why Rotterdam Film Festival's funding institution was established is to promote freedom of speech,

“The festival was screening European films, films from the United States, from other parts of the world, but not so much from Africa, Asia, Latin America, and there was so much talent in these places. He [Hubert Bals] also realised a lot of filmmakers in these areas were having difficulties to realise a film, not only financially but also politically or for other reasons, such as censorship, freedom of speech. For all these reasons, we try to support these filmmakers.” (*personal communication with Chronis*).

Literature Review

This article identifies a certain formula that is dominant in film festivals. Like the fixed formula of mainstream Hollywood, a set of formulas dominates film festivals. Wong (2011) provides a list of the characteristics of festival films, juxtaposing festival films with mainstream films. Even though film festivals screen different types of films for different target audiences, the films selected and screened still privilege certain types of films: dark, serious, and provoking (Wong, 2011). The central characteristics of festival films, according to Wong (2011), are a serious atmosphere, minimalism, open and demanding narrative structures, intertextuality, and controversial issues.

Seriousness and minimalism match the emotive states of pain, death, loss, and questioning life (Wong, 2011). Festival films often have minimal budgets, settings, and special effects. Additionally, festival films often feature marked silence. Many festival films are also set in simple everyday settings, such as houses or offices. Daily life is a central theme in festival films: the places where the scenes are shot are often intensely saturated with humanity (Wong, 2011).

Distinct from the formula used in Hollywood, which features a coherent narrative with causality between one action and the next, festival films use a narrative that provokes the mind and is non-linear. Festival films rely on anti-classic narratives, which set them apart from mainstream cinema. They demand much from and provoke their audiences, feature multiple utterances, are usually open-ended, and rarely lead to one conclusive interpretation (Wong, 2011).

In addition, festival films rarely employ prominent or professional actors (Wong, 2011). This is in part due their minimalism, which distinguishes festival films from Hollywood products. Filmmakers believe that the popularity of stars would steal the spotlight from the true star, that is, the film itself, and there is a concern that the popularity factor would produce intertextuality. Amateur actors and actresses, on the other hand, offer a blank slate and bring a form of authenticity home to the audience (Wong, 2011).

Shaw (2013) published two articles on the motion of funding from Europe to Latin American filmmakers. In the first, “Sex, Texts and Money, Funding and Latin America Queer Cinema” (2013), she implies that filmmakers receive funding when they focus on LGBTQ issues. In her second article, “European Support for Latin American Cinema” (2015), Shaw draws the conclusion that lower-class culture is represented as backward, superstitious, and ignorant. She found that there is a tendency in the favored films toward exotic disgust toward natives and to depict people in ways that are close to poverty tourism and the exotic other.

In her book *Curating Africa in the Age of Film Festivals*, Lindiwe Dovey (2015) discusses the participation of African filmmakers in the Cannes and Rotterdam Film Festivals. Dovey assesses several aspects of African representation in European film festivals. One of these is given in a quotation from Manthia Diawara, who said that the French film industry, including the Cannes Film Festival, selected filmmakers whose work was in line with the European agenda (Dovey, 2015). Orientalism also operates as a form of self-exoticization,

as in the case of the films Cissé (1987) and Ouédraogo (1990). Both received much positive attention at the Cannes Film Festival, but were interpreted by some as a setback for the representation of Africa because they were considered to beautify and exploit Africa for Western consumption (Dovey, 2015).

Taymuree (2014) analyzed two Iranian films that circulated among international film festivals in her article “Self-Exoticization for the Film Festival” (2004). Orientalism can clearly be seen in the film *Women Without Men* (2009), especially in the portrayal of its female characters. These figures are more of an oriental fantasy, with the appearance of a beautiful doll and not a complex human character (Taymuree, 2014). Images that operate in this way and are coupled with the absence of constructive dialogue reduce the presence of the women who are on the screen, making it difficult to leave the dynamics of Orientalist power behind (Taymuree, 2014). The film *A Separation* (Farhadi, 2011), on the other hand, uses different cinematic language and treats women as more than just bodies. This film gives depth to each character and is supported by a strong text that shows more than one central character.

Methodology

This article examines the aesthetic strategy of Indonesian filmmakers who receive funding from film festivals by analyzing the movies as texts, focusing on the visual and auditory elements such as the characters, physical settings, scenes, plots, and sounds in response to the styles dominant at such festivals. Here, we will examine three Indonesian films that received funding from the Hubert Bals Fund, which is associated with the Rotterdam Film Festival, and was the first funding body ever set up for a film festival. These three are *Another Trip to the Moon* (Ismail Basbeth), *Peculiar Vacation and Other Illnesses* (Yosep Anggi Noen), and *Postcards from the Zoo* (Edwin).

Table 1 below encapsulates formula preferred by film festivals, gathered from previous studies, which can be used to analyze other Third-World films funded by festivals. The table also serves as a confirmation of the existing politics of taste in film festivals, wherein it seems that only films that follow a certain formula are considered to deserve funding and circulation in film festivals. The strategies of Indonesian filmmakers for dealing with these realities will be investigated here, and whether they must follow the formulas faithfully and submit to the taste of the festivals or if they can break free and evade the demands placed on them by European funders.

Results

Aesthetics plays an important role in film festivals. Program directors claim that aesthetics is the central quality that film festivals are looking for (Wong, 2011). The aesthetics must be analyzed because funding bodies claim that it is the main reason why a particular film project is chosen for funding. Aesthetics in films covers a number of aspects affecting the perceptions of cinema as an expression of human creativity, including doctrines such as realism, neorealism, and expressionism (Wong, 2011). Purnama (2013) interprets film aesthetics as being how “filmmakers craft how their films look, sound, and tell their stories (their ‘film artistry’), producing filmic output with distinctive visual and audio styles, narrative structures, and approaches to thematic explorations (‘film aesthetics’),” which he briefly defines as the working dynamics of the three main elements in a film, namely, theme, story, and style.

Elements of Eastern exoticism occur in the first funded film analyzed here, *Another Trip to the Moon* (Basbeth, 2015). The Hubert Bals Fund funded the script development in 2014. The film tells the story of Asa, who lives with her friend, Laras, in the forest. The film shows the daily life of these two, including how they wake up, bathe in the river, go fishing, and hunt rabbits for their meals. However, one day, Laras is struck by lightning and dies. Asa’s mother performs a ritual to allow Asa to return home. Asa meets a werehound (*manusia anjing*), and together they leave the forest and return home. Asa and the werehound get married, the werehound is transformed into a human form, and they have a child. However, after some time goes by, Asa leaves the house and returns to the forest.

Basbeth (2015) uses minimalism to tell this story, with the limited settings of the forest and the home. There is no dialogue, only the humming of the characters. The absence of dialogue opens up the narrative and requires the audience to work hard: who are these two female characters, who is the woman with the traditional hair bun (*sanggul*), who are these odd creatures around Asa, why are they living in the forest, what are the characters humming, and what language are they using? The audience does not know the name of the main character if they do not read the film synopsis. In the final scene, Laras, who dies at the beginning of the film, suddenly shows up and expresses approval of Asa’s decision to return to the forest, which may baffle viewers.

Furthermore, in the film, mystical nuances are present in the various rituals depicted: the ritual to call Asa, which includes traditional offerings (*sesajen*), a foreign-sound

Table 1 Festival Film Formulas

Themes	Aesthetics
• Daily life • Third-World stereotypes strongly associated with poverty • Political agenda of Europe/the West	• Realism • Minimalism • Silence • Settings are places of daily life • Almost never employs special effects • Casts actors and actresses who are not/not yet prominent • Open endings • Eastern exoticism

language (the humming), and the burial ritual of Laras. Basbeth (2015) also explores exoticism through Asa and Laras's friend's time in the forest: their primitive clothing, unusual sleeping positions, and half-naked bathing. All of these scenes are set in an exotic forest locale with the shade of trees and crystal-clear water. Exoticism is manifest in Asa's sensuality and the beauty of the forest panorama.

The exploration of exoticism does not end in the forest, which represents nature, but also in the ways in which culture is presented. When Asa and the werewolf return home and get married, they live in an exotic Javanese house that is described as a "beautiful classical Javanese house" on the official website of the Rotterdam Film Festival. The clothes worn by Asa, her mother, and the other female characters do not represent modern attire either; instead they have traditional hair buns (*sanggul*), fabric tied around the waist as skirts (*kain*), and traditional tops resembling *kebaya*. Asa also gives birth at home with the help of two women, complete with traditional offerings (*sesajen*) but not, for instance, at a hospital assisted by medical specialists.

This demonstrates Basbeth's compliance with the taste of film festivals, manifest in the depiction of the daily life of his characters, the use of minimalism, and a setting that goes back and forth between a home and a forest. The lack of dialogue also opens up the narrative such that the audience can never know for sure what Basbeth is trying to convey. Although his film is saturated with Eastern exoticism, Basbeth (2015) successfully eschews stereotyped representations of Third World poverty. Poverty is not exploited in his film. Instead, he focuses only on primitivity and Eastern exoticism. Another negotiation is the use of surrealism instead of realism, the predominant style of films that receive funding. Due to the presence of supernatural creatures in some scenes and even a UFO in the middle of the film, as well as a dead body that suddenly pops up from its grave, *Another Trip to the Moon* portrays absurdities that cut against the dominant realist style of film festivals.

Peculiar Vacation and Other Illnesses (Noen, 2012), shows Third-World poverty issues. It received funding for post-production from the Hubert Bals Fund in 2012. The film tells the story of Ning, a married woman who worked at a second-hand clothing store before starting a new job at a furniture store. Ning and her male coworker, Mur, are assigned to deliver a sofa from Yogyakarta to a remote village in Temanggung. The film is a road movie that follows the journey of Ning and Mur for two days and depicts the stops they take along the way.

Problems regarding Third-World's gender stereotyping are also present in this film through Ning and Mur's journey, which is punctuated by shots of the daily life of Ning's husband, who spends his time watching television at home, selling gasoline on the side of the road, and visiting prostitutes. The film centers on the working class in Yogyakarta, who are represented by Ning and Mur, workers at a furniture store. In Ning and Mur's two-day trip, the filmmaker gives images of the daily life of the lower middle class in Yogyakarta and its environment, portrayed in all of its simplicity.

Peculiar Vacation and Other Illnesses takes a realist approach to create a truth-effect. The film follows these two

characters on their journey to Temanggung. The settings of the scenes that Noen chooses are scenic, lacking the touch of modernity and exhibiting breathtaking views. The film is also minimalist: it shows slow movements that are unaccompanied by powerful music. Furthermore, Noen (2012) casts actors and actresses who are not well known. The exploitation of Indonesia's scenic panorama between Yogyakarta and Temanggung is a form of self-exoticization. The daily life of the lower-middle class, who struggle with issues of quality of life, reproduces Third World stereotypes. Thus, Noen is in compliance with the predominant taste of film festivals.

The last film examined here, *Postcards from the Zoo* (Taurisia, Arsjad, & Edwin, 2012), is unique as it distances itself from Third-World exoticism offering a more modernized and less primitive picture of the Third-World. The film received funding for script development from the Hubert Bals Fund in 2009, as well as funding for post-production from the Hubert Bals Fund in 2011. It tells the story of Lana, a little girl who was abandoned by her parents at Ragunan Zoo, located in Jakarta. Lana grows up at the zoo and later begins to work there. One day, she comes across a magician in a cowboy costume. Lana then leaves the zoo with the magician and begins living outside of the zoo, where she works many odd jobs: selling medicines, performing magic tricks for money, and, eventually, working in a high-end massage parlor.

Postcards from the Zoo takes a minimalist approach with the scenes at the zoo as there is no explanation or information of Lana's background, her childhood, or why her parents abandoned her. Nor are there any special effects used, and the location of the central scenes is the zoo. The effects of silence and the minimalism of the background music are evident throughout the film. The film's director succeeds in negotiating his position in his film. Even though he depicts Jakarta as a city that is far from modern, he manages to disengage from exoticism and chooses instead to exploit the zoo and its habitants. This decision allows his work to achieve a more universal resonance, while at the same eschewing local exoticism.

Discussion

The three funded films all have relevance for the struggle of women. In *Another Trip to the Moon*, Asa resides in the forest, is alone when her friend dies, is forced to return home and get married, has children, but in the end chooses to leave her life as a wife and mother to return to the forest. *Peculiar Vacation and Other Illnesses* focuses on Ning, who moves from one job to another and must go on a long journey to support herself and her husband financially. *Postcards from the Zoo* tells the story of Lana, a little girl abandoned by her parents at the zoo, where she grows up and becomes an employee, resigns to become an assistant to a street magician, and masseuse for a perverted man, before eventually deciding to return to the zoo.

Asa in *Another Trip to the Moon* is represented as a brown-skinned woman with straight, long, dark hair. Her depiction in the film demonstrates Basbeth's compliance with the taste of film festivals, aligning Asa with a Western stereotype of Eastern beauty. Asa's homes, the forest and the

house, illustrate a binary opposition. The forest is shown in the film as a tropical place with lush vegetation and tall, dense trees. As a setting, a forest conveys a sense of primitivity and implies adventure and myths of freedom, as well as interaction with wild, unknown, or foreign things.

The home also carries the meaning of togetherness and family, which, in the film, is linked to the idea of attachment and, in the end, a sense of imprisonment. In the binary opposition between the forest and the house and in the myths about freedom and attachment, Basbeth successfully manages to stake out a position. Asa, who is depicted as a traditional Indonesian woman, struggles with the tension between her personal freedom and a domestic, subordinate, woman's role.

Ning, in *Peculiar Vacation and Other Illnesses*, is a wife, positioned in the film as a subordinate. Her character is juxtaposed with her husband, who is the dominant character in the film. The binary opposition evident in the film refers to how the two characters are depicted in contrast with each other. While Ning is in the car on her journey, her husband is at home, watching TV. This depiction constructs a binary opposition between movement (dynamic) and immobility (static), producing contrasting connotative meanings, namely, progress versus stagnation.

Noen (2012) is attempting to reverse the deeply rooted myth in Indonesian society of the traditional roles of husband and wife, in which the wife, who should by tradition be at home, must be the breadwinner. Meanwhile, the husband does nothing and remains at home. Ning's character is Noen's negotiation, in which women struggle as wives, but then become the ones who leave the house and take up an active role as breadwinners. Noen uses Ning to demonstrate an image of an Indonesian woman who leaves a subordinate position and becomes the backbone of their family.

Lana, in *Postcards from the Zoo*, is a woman with shoulder-length hair and fair skin, which are characteristics often associated with young women. The mythic figure of the young woman is inexperienced and always wants to experiment with novelty. The magician character is a trigger for Lana to leave the zoo, explore life in the city, and try out new things. The binary opposition Edwin portrays in his film is between the zoo and the city. The zoo is a type of a cage, but the city is a representation of modernity and openness. Lana leaves the zoo, a cage which embodies ideas of subordination and stagnation, for the city, which signifies modernity and is associated with progress. Lana's decision to move to the city is a form of the negotiation of the filmmaker, as it shows the anxiety that Lana experiences due to her subordination. Even though Lana eventually returns to the zoo, the idea of freedom, as temptation, is a form of the filmmaker's negotiated position.

A number of conclusions can be drawn from this discussion. One way in which filmmakers negotiate their positions is to construct binary oppositions. The struggle that the women experience is thus manifested in the form of contradictions. Binary oppositions enable filmmakers on one hand to compromise with the taste of film festivals and on the other hand to incorporate values at odds with it. This binary opposition is exhibited in the positioning of women characters in a state between subordination and independence. The filmmakers, however, were also able to find room to transcend

such binarism as they creatively tried to 'subvert' some of the constraints set by the European film-funders' agenda through their aesthetic strategies that did not always comply faithfully with the funders' guidelines.

For filmmakers, the anxiety felt by Indonesian women is shown in relation to their subordination while they engage with ideas of independence as a form of their negotiation. Subordination forms part of the Western stereotype of Eastern women and engaging with the notion of independence depicted in the films means that the filmmakers are incorporating values that are opposed to those constructed by the West. However, this does not mean that filmmakers' negotiation should be exempt from criticism. Women's independence in films can be understood as a means of negotiation for filmmakers, but it can also be perceived by filmgoers at festivals as illustrating the success of Western feminist values in penetrating the Third World.

Here, aesthetic and strategic attempts of Third World filmmakers continue to harbor ambivalence. On the one hand, their work might lead to deviations from expected European standards, while on the other, they could also reinforce its grip on them. Regardless of which side carries more weight, it can always be easily reversed, and it inevitably produces ambivalence or even contradiction.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The analysis of the three films highlighted here, which all received funding from the Hubert Bals Fund, affirms the compliance of these filmmakers with the dictates of film festivals' taste and politics. The typical characteristics of festival films from the Third World can be observed in all three of these films. The filmmakers show full awareness and sufficient knowledge of what kinds of films are desired by the funding bodies. As they gain increased access to films from European film festivals, Third World filmmakers are becoming more capable of discerning the taste of funding bodies and of Europe in general. This reinforces the politics of taste that dominates film festivals.

However, the filmmakers discussed in this article are brave enough to negotiate and, even though they may not have completely defied the taste of film festivals, they can position themselves as active parties in strategizing and can negotiate with the taste of the bodies that provide them with funding. This is an important finding because it reveals the filmmakers' 'uneasy' acceptance of the dominant European tastes and political correctness while at the same time also demonstrates their ability to navigate their ways through those constraints in order to exert their relative autonomy as artists. It further proves that the funding institutions' control can never be total and absolute. Even though the funding recipients may show compliance of a sort, they can always make room and opportunity to negotiate. This is the research gap that was not addressed by previous studies on this issue.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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