



BRILL

BIJDRAGEN TOT DE TAAL-, LAND- EN
VOLKENKUNDE 177 (2021) 208–220



brill.com/bki

Indie Cinema and the Short Film Assemblage

An Essay on Dewi pulang

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Abstract

Dewi pulang (Dewi goes home), the 2016 short film by Candra Aditya, offers a means to redefine the meaning of independence for contemporary Indonesian screen production. In the years of Reformasi following the end of the New Order, to be independent was to be in solidarity with the reform movement, and to express a DIY sensibility that did not rely on big production companies or the state. In recent years, the meaning of independence has been complicated by a changing cultural economy of film, including the accommodation of many previously independent filmmakers into the mainstream. Rather than seeing independence embodied in the film or filmmaker, this essay considers the history of short film and the foundational role of *komunitas* (communities) as the location for independent media practice. Independence is theorized as a characteristic of the assemblage of organizations, events, and infrastructures that facilitate the production, circulation, and consumption of short film.

Keywords

short film – assemblage – Indonesia – *Dewi pulang* – independent cinema

Looking over developments in the Indonesian screen industries since Reformasi, it is hard to identify who or what is independent these days, given that many previously ‘independent’ filmmakers now work with large production companies and no longer see the state as a target of opprobrium. During the Reformasi years (1998–2005), it was easier to identify independent filmmakers and their films due to their deliberate self-identification, their political stance, and their adopted modes of production (Sasono 2020). Independence was used

to assert autonomy of the creator free from dictates of state and big business, while creating work true to the creator's intent and vision. Now, however, independence is normalized, turned into a marketing label or a 'genre' akin to art cinema, often accompanied by an orientation towards international film festivals. Arguably, the meaning of independence has become more blurred and complicated (Ortner 2012).

To reassess the meaning of independence in Indonesian screen production, this essay takes as its entry point Candra Aditya's 2016 short film *Dewi pulang* (Dewi goes home). At first glance *Dewi pulang* exemplifies the blurred meaning of independence in Indonesian screen production: while sponsored by the government's Pusat Pengembangan Perfilman (Film Development Centre) and not especially politically radical, it is a rich cultural text and bears many hallmarks of typical indie cinema that deals with quotidian subject matter.¹ The filmmaker Candra Aditya, who wrote and directed *Dewi pulang*, continues to work 'freelance', sporadically writing stories and scripts, drawing on a pool of similarly freelance talent to make films as and when he can. Taking government sponsorship is not unusual for someone in his position, but it did not mean acquiescence to government demands: he fought to retain scenes of Dewi smoking, despite objections from the government sponsor. Although seemingly minor, it speaks to the ways in which short filmmakers assert their independence by pushing boundaries and challenging norms.²

Taking *Dewi pulang* as an example of an independent film requires looking beyond the text and the formalities of its funding, to consider also the 'life' of the film as it is conceived, made, distributed, exhibited, and consumed. Following Harvey (2007:263), we see that the short film 'appears to engage in four topographic spheres of activity: modes of production, object, text, and trace'. She highlights the ways in which the life of a short film does not end with the production of the film (object) but extends to the way the film comes to be (production) and the traces it leaves as it circulates as a cultural object and its reception as text. Harvey's expanded definition of the short film decentres the film-object and highlights the assemblage of networks, agents, and organizations that animate an individual title. By following Harvey, this essay reveals a

1 Funded by the Pusat Pengembangan Perfilman, an agency of Kementerian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan (Ministry of Education and Culture). <https://pusbangfilm.kemdikbud.go.id/> (accessed 12-12-2020).

2 *Prenjak* / *In the year of monkey* (Wregas Bhanuteja, 2016) for example, despite containing an uncensored explicit scene, was screened to government officials including the president and went on to win both the national Citra Award for Best Short film and the Leica Cine Discovery Prize for Short Film at Cannes Film Festival in 2016.

longer history of short film in Indonesia, which developed an alternative mode of production, distribution, exhibition, and appreciation since the 1970s that subsequently shaped the indie film movement associated with Reformasi and that has continued to provide a model of independence for filmmakers. Central to this short film assemblage are the Indonesian groupings called *komunitas*, which operate as the nodes in the rhizomatic networks of short film (Engchuan 2020).³ By taking this contextual approach, *Dewi pulang* becomes a means to consider the ways in which independence can productively be theorized in the Indonesian context with implications for the study and understanding of independence for screen production around the world.

Independence is usually defined ‘negatively’—that is, independent of something (Lent 2012)—and taken to mean the commercial, mainstream screen industries with their big companies, hierarchical decision-making, capital-intensive production, and mass-market appeal (Ortner 2012). Although derived from a North American experience in the 1990s by filmmakers operating outside the large Hollywood studios, the term was readily adopted by new film movements in Southeast Asia in the late 1990s and early 2000s in line with the political reform movements provoked by the Asian financial crisis of 1997–1998 and the development of digital technologies that democratized access to the means of production (Khou 2007; Lent 2012). This became the main understanding and context of independence across the region.

In these definitions of independence, the feature-length fiction film is privileged as the exemplary mode, as it is easy to identify its ‘other’: big production companies and their producers, mainstream content, and stars, with marketing aimed for release in multiplex cinema chains. Other forms of content, such as short film and documentaries, are left outside the discussion. Partly this is explained by an imagined hierarchy that privileges the feature film over these other formats. Even for practitioners, the short film is often regarded as a ‘training space’ or showreel ‘for aspiring filmmakers, [and] a momentary stopping point on the path to feature-length fulfilment’ (Holohan 2009). As a result, discussions of the short film usually focus on formal properties, most notably length, and how this gives the form its distinctive characteristics. Gatot Prakosa (2008:27), for example, says that the short film ‘has a language far different to fiction feature films, due to its shorter play time’.⁴ Although some short-form productions, such as the music video, the advertisement, video art, and

3 See also Engchuan’s contribution to this issue.

4 ‘memiliki Bahasa yang jauh berbeda dengan film cerita panjang, mengingat masa putarnya yang singkat’.

increasingly the short-form social media video, have their own cultural (and economic) significance, the feature film remains the *sine qua non* of the screen industries.

The focus on form by scholars such as Prakosa and Holohan decontextualizes short film out of what Singapore scholar Sophie Harvey (2007:263) calls 'moving image culture'. Harvey draws on Juan Foo's essay 'Mini Cinema: A nation's cinema starts with shorts' (2002), which 'calls for a re(frame)ing of Singapore's moving image culture that recognizes the relevance and importance of short film production' (Harvey 2007:264). The point is not to rewrite film history in a way that simply places the short film as an imagined origin; rather, as Adrian Pasaribu (2013) argues in the Indonesian case, it is to challenge the predominant '*bioskop-sentris*' (cinema-centric) model of cinema that privileges and foregrounds the feature film. By *bioskop-sentris*, Pasaribu means that the prevailing understanding of 'film' is of a feature-length work, comprised of a progression of notable titles and concerned with box-office figures as the measurement of success and cultural significance. In this model, the film industry is centralized around large production companies, television stations, and major exhibitors which operate rigid, large-scale, capital-intensive businesses mostly centralized in Jakarta.

By contrast, Pasaribu says that the short film belongs to a different kind of '*budaya sinema*' (cinematic culture) that is community-based, bottom up, youth-driven, regional, and geographically dispersed. Moreover, short films move in and through the rhizomatic networks of spaces and organizations of this *budaya sinema* in ways that attest to its 'nomadic' and 'polymorphous' qualities (Harvey 2007). Together these characteristics constitute a set of principles and organizational features that not only mark it as distinct from the feature film industry but also substantiate its independence. Shorts are less premised on the need to make money to cover investment costs and therefore provide the space for experimentation, voice, and autonomy unavailable in large media productions. Interactions and relationships may continue with the commercial media industries, but an alternative economy of short film organized around its independent principles persists.

1 Short Film Assemblage

What is significant about *Dewi pulang*, and other shorts like it, is not its length or whether Candra Aditya wants to make a feature film (he does) but, rather, how it reveals the infrastructure of communities, events, and platforms across the archipelago that support and sustain short film. Candra Aditya had worked

in these networks for several years before conceptualizing *Dewi pulang* and securing funding. Once completed, the film then moved through a network of festivals, including Purbalingga in 2017, and communities such as Boemboe Forum, which organized Gemar Film Pendek #3 (at Kineforum, Jakarta in January 2018) and Sinema Rabu in South Jakarta (March 2018), before being hosted on Vidsee, a Singapore-based video streaming platform. Together these can be conceived of as nodes within the assemblage of short film.

Central to the short film assemblage in Indonesia is the locally emergent formation called the *komunitas* (community). *Komunitas* are social formations of likeminded individuals who come together for discussion and collaboration; to build events and create publications and other resources; and to nurture new talent and voices. *Komunitas* are often deeply local but develop relations with others across the country in rhizomatic networks. *Komunitas* are amorphous and malleable, appearing and disappearing, at times territorializing into events, festivals, and annual gatherings. *Komunitas* form an alternative economy of film production, distribution, and appreciation that maintains its identity as 'independent' by operating outside of commercial networks and industrialized forms of cultural production.

Prominent *komunitas* organizers Lulu Ratna (2007) and Tintin Wulia (2019 [2005]) note the plethora of *komunitas* which emerged in the late 1990s in the tumult and opportunity of the Asian financial crisis and the end of the New Order regime. Such networks supported feature filmmakers in the early years of Reformasi who readily adopted the indie or independent label to describe their intent, politics, and practice contra the state and commercial production companies. As feature films have returned to mainstream pop culture (Barker 2019), many Reformasi-generation indie filmmakers have been incorporated into the production processes of the largescale production houses. They maintain whatever creative autonomy they can. But the meaning of independent has become more complicated and contested.

Indeed, the origins of the independent-film movement in Indonesia are not to be found in the moment of Reformasi but rather in the work of short film activists who engineered short film as a nomadic movement in the 1970s (Prakosa 2005; Pasaribu 2013). Gatot Prakosa, one of the movement's notable figures and a short film historian, describes the short film scene of the 1970s and 1980s as '*sinema ngamen*' (busking cinema) because of the way filmmakers went from place to place, looking for places to screen and audiences to engage (Prakosa 2008:6). At one of the first events, Festival Film Mini (Mini-Film Festival), held in 1973 in Jakarta, several filmmakers formed Sinema 8, a group dedicated to 8mm filmmaking to challenge established cinema conventions (Jayasrana 2015). Many of these works were experimental and underground

and included work from Gotot Prakosa, Hadi Poernomo, and Henri Darmawan. They congregated at the city-government-operated Dewan Kesenian Jakarta (DKJ), which was located at the Taman Ismail Marzuki (TIM), and used it as a centre for gathering and exhibition (Prakosa 2008:4).

Their work also contrasted with official short films produced by the Ministry of Information and other state agencies to promote the developmentalist agenda called 'Gelora Pembangunan' (Spirit of Development) of the New Order regime (Jayasrana 2015). Official films were screened to villages using a mobile apparatus that was operated by ministry officials, usually before a feature film presentation. Other 'shorts' were screened on TVRI, the country's only television station, also operated by the Ministry of Information. Festival Film Indonesia (FFI) began to acknowledge the short film in its categories of awards, though its focus remained on propaganda and official film. But otherwise, film activists were able to evade state control since the regime focused on feature films and the mainstream distribution channels of broadcast television and cinemas. It allowed filmmakers to experiment in form and content, since they were less worried about mainstream appeal, state censorship, or large budgets.

The art school Institut Kesenian Jakarta (IKJ) became an important site for the creation, appreciation, and discussion of short film in the 1980s and especially into the 1990s. Required to make two 16 mm films to graduate (Prakosa 2008:7), film students not only completed a practical task but created opportunities for experimentation and dialogue. Noted critic of the regime and iconic filmmaker Garin Nugroho emerged from IKJ in this period, graduating with his short film *Gerbong 1, 2, 3* (Wagon 1, 2, 3, 1984), followed by important documentary work including *Air dan Romi* (Water and Romi, 1991), before moving into feature film in the 1990s with his debut *Cinta dalam sepotong roti* (Love in a slice of bread, 1991). In this period, 'short filmmaking was still limited to the "exclusive" circle of film students in the Jakarta Art Institute (IKJ)' located in the national capital (Ratna 2007:304).

Others graduating from IKJ in the early 1990s shared a similar trajectory, but as Prakosa (2008:7) notes, they were beginning to interact much more with overseas festivals. For her graduating project, Nan Achnas made *Hanya satu hari* (Only one day, 1988), which went on to win the Grand Prize at The Young Cinema Film Festival in Tokyo. Riri Riza completed *Sonata kampung bata* (Sonata of the brick village, 1991), which screened at Oberhausen Film Festival, before he worked as the production designer on Nugroho's *Bulan tertusuk ilalang* (... And the moon dances, 1995). Together with IKJ classmate Mira Lesmana and music video director Rizal Mantovani they conceptualized, shot, and released the omnibus film *Kuldesak* (Cul-de-sac, 1998), which began a revival of feature film production (Barker 2019). Starting in shorts became a noted

path for other directors, including Harry Suharyadi,⁵ Hanung Bramantyo,⁶ Ifa Isfansyah,⁷ Yosep Anggi Noen,⁸ and Edwin.⁹ While their identities and practices shifted towards the feature film, this did not mean that they became totally disconnected from short film, however, as many continued to move back and forth or contribute to shorts communities through mentorship, for example.

By the late 1990s, however, outside IKJ, new forms of ‘informal networking’ were beginning to emerge with the disintegration of the New Order and its systems of control. *Komunitas* formed in the new civil society spaces and drew on the energy of reform to facilitate the production, promotion, and discussion of short film (Ratna 2007:304). One of the earliest short-film-focused *komunitas* was Konfiden (Komunitas Film Independen), which organized the Indonesian Independent Film-Video Festival (FFVII) from 1999 to 2002. At the first FFVII, Konfiden published a manifesto in which ‘independence’ was defined for the first time in Indonesia, drawing on a 1998 article in *Filmmaker* magazine by Jim Moran and Holly Willis. It details how independence is operationalized in the sectors of technology, industry, aesthetics, economy, and politics (see Figure 1). Although adopted from the American film lexicon, Indonesians did not have an equivalent to ‘Hollywood’ (Murti 2009 [2007]), so to be independent meant being in solidarity with the reform movement, expressing a DIY sensibility, and distancing oneself from commercial production companies and the state. Here the meaning of independence is localized and vernacularized, as it was in many places around the world, including Southeast Asia (Lent 2012).

Short films and their *komunitas* continued to proliferate as others around the archipelago began to take up media production to create community, tell

5 Graduated IKJ with *Happy ending* (1996), which screened at Busan International Film Festival. His debut feature, *Pachinko and everybody's happy* (2000), was made in Japan.

6 Made *Topeng kekasih* (Lovers' mask, 2001) about inter-generational trauma of the 1960s' purge of leftists that founded the New Order regime. Bramantyo went on to direct early independent features including *Brownies* (2004), *Catatan akhir sekolah* (Final year notes, 2005), and the mainstream hit *Get married* (2007).

7 Made shorts, including *Be quiet exam is in progress!* (2006) and *Half teaspoon / Setengah sendok teh* (2008) before his first feature *Garuda di dadaku* (The eagle in my chest, 2009).

8 Made several shorts, including *Ketemu bapak* (Met father, 2002) and *A lady caddy who never saw a hole in one* (2013), before his features *Solo solitude / Istirahatlah kata-kata* (2016) and *The science of fictions / Hiruk-pikuk si Al-Kisah* (2019).

9 Made *A very slow breakfast* (2002), an experimental meditation on time and desire while at IKJ. He continued making shorts, including *Kara, anak sebatang pohon / Kara, the daughter of a tree* (2005), which screened at Cannes Film Festival. Edwin moved into feature production with *Babi buta yang ingin terbang / Blind pig who wants to fly* (2008), *Kebun binatang / Postcards from the zoo* (2012), and the recent mainstream films, high-school drama *Posesif* (Possessive, 2017) and book-adaptation *Aruna & lidahnya* (Aruna & her palate, 2018).



FIGURE 1 Independence as defined in the Konfiden programme book in 1999
 Translation: Independents as a strong opposition movement against the dominant media practices in some sectors. In technology, independents operate in the world of the amateur (home video, 16 mm, 8 mm) against the professionals (35 mm, 70 mm). In industry, independents operate individually or in free groups that oppose production, distribution, and exhibition organized on a mass scale. In aesthetics, independents support originality, performance, and avant-garde in opposition to the conventional, the generic, and the residual. In economics, independents operate for a love of cinema rather than a love of money. In politics, independents operate in and explore the culture of the marginalized and the oppressed against the centre, the dominant, and the mainstream.

IMAGE SOURCE: JAYASRANA 2015

stories, and express ideas. Of these, Minikino, established in Denpasar in 2002, and Jakarta-based Boemboe Forum, established in 2003, were two of the most prominent, organizing screenings, workshops, talks, exhibitions, and networking opportunities with others domestically and internationally. Shorts featured at the independently operated Jakarta International Film Festival (JIFFEST), first held in 1999, and in dedicated festivals such as Purbalingga, which was established in 2006.¹⁰ The official Festival Film Indonesia (FFI) was relaunched in 2004 with a short film category, won that year by *Djedjak darah: Surat ter-untuk Adinda* (Blood print: A letter to the beloved), directed by M. Aprisiyanto from Yogyakarta, marking an aesthetic break with the FFI winners under the New Order.

These networks have expanded beyond Indonesia with the creation of regional networks and communities, fostering the exchange of ideas, talent, and capital. International film festivals in Busan, Singapore, and Europe have nurtured many Indonesian filmmakers through shorts programmes and by hosting workshops and training. Vidsee, a Singapore-based film-sharing platform,

¹⁰ <http://clcpurbalingga.id/tentang-kami.html> (accessed 14-8-2020).

began in 2013 to share and promote Southeast Asian shorts alongside other video sites, such as YouTube. SeaShorts Festival, established in Malaysia in 2017, promotes shorts production and regional networking. Both bring into dialogue filmmakers and others in the region and are part of the expanding transnational assemblage of short film.

Traces of the short film continue to shape commercial media production from online content such as web series to omnibus feature-length projects. Social media company LINE, for example, sponsored an *Ada apa dengan Cinta?* (What's up with Love?) teaser in 2014 that was watched by over seven million people and led to the feature *Ada apa dengan Cinta 2?* (Riri Riza, 2016). Celebrated features director Joko Anwar has used the shorts form as paid promotion and, in one case, as a teaser to secure feature funding.¹¹ Others have followed the *Kuldesak* example and made omnibus features, including *Berbagi suami* (Love for share, Nia Dinata, 2006), *Parts of the heart* (Paul Agusta, 2012), and *Belkibolang* (Agung Sentausa, Ifa Isfansyah, Tumpal Christian Tampubolon, Rico Marpaung, Anggun Priambodo, Azhar Lubis, Rico Surya Pratama, Edwin, and Sidi Saleh, 2010). As with the new format of the 'microfilm' in China (Gilardi et al. 2020), we see how the short form is also integral to the new media industries of Indonesia.

2 Conclusion

Dewi pulang offers a means to understand the economy of short film that operates in parallel with, but not necessarily in opposition to, commercial short formats (such as advertising) on the one hand, and the mainstream feature film industry on the other. From this emerges a newly theorized meaning of independence that is premised on the kinds of infrastructures, organizations, and modes of production that emerge from this dispersed, nomadic, and polymorphous moving-image culture. Indonesia offers a unique vantage point with its *komunitas* that have energized and sustained this economy of shorts. *Dewi pulang* stands as an emblematic film that speaks to the larger film culture in Indonesia, to the skills of the filmmaker, and to the new definition of independent film culture.

11 Joko Anwar made a short film for Nokia and an advertisement for Toyota called *Jalanan aja* (Just drive, 2017) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ePmDVWD5ido> (accessed 14-8-2020). He then made *Jenny* (2016) as a pitch for *Pengabdian Setan / Satan's Slaves* (2017). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3CLoJjn4kGg> (accessed 14-8-2020).

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Adrian Pasaribu (*Cinema Poetica*) for his assistance with supplementary information, to special-edition editor Richard Fox for his diligence and support, and Amrita Malhi and Charanpal Singh Bal for their writing camaraderie.

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