

THE BOYCOTTING OF 'KUCUMBU TUBUH INDAHKU' AS A THREAT TOWARDS FILM AND LOCAL INDONESIAN CULTURE

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Abstract: Kucumbu Tubuh Indahku, or internationally known as “Memories of My Body”, is an Indonesian movie directed by Garin Nugroho, which raises awareness on LGBT themes in its portrayal of a teenage boy's journey in becoming a Lengger dancer. The movie can be considered as a biographical film for its plot that is loosely based on one of the Lengger Lanang performers' personal life. The release of this movie in 2019 has significantly stirred the Indonesian public, accumulating controversy from various parties on the morality aspect of the movie. The objective of this research is to discover whether the boycotting acts towards the movie have affected film culture and the existence of Lengger as a part of local Indonesian culture in a threatening manner. This research incorporates qualitative analytical methods by focusing on textual analysis approach. Theories used within the study consist of the Apparatus Theory, signifying that cinema is a representation of a certain ideological reality, and the Foucauldian Discourse Analysis, which refers to the focus on power relations and its effects on social practices. The public's response of banning and restricting the movie portrays the lack of acceptance of the reality the movie represents, therefore dismissing Indonesian tradition and the role of cinema as a whole, signifying how apprehensiveness in receiving Kucumbu Tubuh Indahku acts as a threat towards local and film culture.

Keywords: Kucumbu Tubuh Indahku, LGBT, Apparatus Theory, Foucauldian Discourse Analysis, Lengger

INTRODUCTION

The journey of films as an art form dates back to the 1890s in France, where the creation of the first projector viable for commercial purposes was established. This projector, also known as *cinématographe*, created by the Lumière brothers, initiated the start of film (also known as motion picture) productions throughout history [1]. Along with the concepts of Méliès, the development of film experienced a change from documentary to sequential narrative formats carried out for the purpose of simple storytelling. This style of film proved popular until the early 1910s, however, eventually losing its audience to a more sophisticated form of storytelling within film productions. Nonetheless, this pioneer movement of film-making set the tone for the industry, making it the foundation of more current organizations found today. The decline of Méliès popularity occurred alongside the industrialization period in Europe, causing other European countries to gain the opportunity to start creating motion pictures of their own, thus establishing the ever-growing and continually developing culture of film known up to this day [2].

Indonesia, being one of the countries influenced by the culture of film, has had its own journey within its local industry. The emergence of various films had had its effects, mainly towards the Indonesian society's outlook on certain issues, thus influencing the values and

standards applied in the country. *Kucumbu Tubuh Indahku*, or internationally known as “Memories of My Body”, is an Indonesian movie directed by Garin Nugroho, which raises awareness on LGBT themes in its portrayal of a teenage boy's journey in becoming a Lengger dancer. The movie can be considered as a biographical film for its plot that is loosely based on Rianto's, one of the Lengger Lanang performers', personal life, which is set in the 1980s. The plot of *Kucumbu Tubuh Indahku* is chronologically divided into four parts. The movie starts off by introducing the viewers to the main character, a young boy named Juno, who lives alone with his PTSD suffering father and spends his days harvesting in the forest and looking for crickets to sell to drivers passing by. After experiencing numerous breakdowns, Juno's father decides to leave for town, abandoning Juno and leaving him to fend for himself. Following this event, during his usual routine in the forest, he stumbles upon a group of Lengger dancers. Juno finds the group to peak his interests and after having been introduced to the teacher – under unusual circumstances, he eventually learns to dance. During one of his days at the centre, he experiences a traumatic event; he witnesses his dance teacher murdering one of his disciples due to an act of adultery.

The second part continues after the witnessing of the murder when he is taken in by his aunt and taught to take part in her business regarding hens. In this chapter Juno learns of his special gift of checking the fertility of hens, but this brings consequences to his actions as it is considered as an unethical and dirty action. He receives frequent punishing and eventually breaks down in front of his new dance teacher. In this event, his dance teacher acts as a motherly figure and tells him to touch her chest; however, the indiscreetness of the act calls the attention of locals and the woman is punished for her alleged acts of immorality.

The next part of the movie continues with Juno in his teenage years as he follows another relative to a bigger town after the incident. He works as an assistant tailor and soon meets a boxer whom he immediately falls for due to his unexpected gentle mannerisms. Despite this fact, Juno has to learn to accept the unusual circumstances of his situation in his environment and let go as the boxer insists on conforming to society's masculine norms. Unfortunate fates are met by both of them and Juno is eventually forced to hitchhike to another town nearby.

In the final part of the movie, politics and power relations are introduced to be involved with societal standards, thus proving to harm Juno and the dance troupe he has recently joined as a means of surviving. A certain politician from the area has set his eye out for Juno, but due to conflict and refusal from Juno's end, the politician decides on banishing him and his group, not wanting to have these traditions 'stain' the community. The final act portrays Juno sitting in the back of a pick-up truck, listening to his favourite song as he yet again leaves for another town, staying true to himself and not denying his feelings and sense of identity as he continues along his path in life.

The movie focuses on the concept of the body along with all of its beauties and wonders, sensuality and sexuality being key factors within the narrative. Mingled with traditional elements of Javanese culture, it reflects a certain reality filled with struggles as experienced by Rianto. According to Fox [3], films are a form of representation for certain already existing realities. This statement is applicable to *Kucumbu Tubuh Indahku* as a representation of traditional Indonesian culture. However, the premiere of this movie in Indonesia has gained a considerable amount of backlash due to its LGBT themes. The Indonesian public has responded by wishing it to be banned, releasing petitions and involving religious figures in protest to its showing in movie theatres. These movements protest the film by arguing that it is a misleading portrayal of Indonesian culture, allegedly consisting of immoral values which could be a potential threat to the nation's youth [4].

METHODS

In analyzing the topic, the writers incorporate Apparatus Theory and Discourse by Michel Foucault as the fundamental theories. Several theories in the arena of Cultural Studies are also integrated within the analysis to further corroborate the argument. The main focus of this study is to analyze the impact brought by the boycotting acts.

1. Film Apparatus Theory

Films are works of art which contain elements that spectators are able to identify themselves with and relate to as they are a representation of reality, consisting of familiar concepts and ideologies [5]. Fairfax [5] argues the presence of a relationship between spectators and a certain film as a product of culture, thus reflecting a particular 'idealism' and 'ideology' from society. In his argument, he relates the apparatus theory analysis on films to Lacan's 'mirror stage', where worlds within a film are recognizable to the viewer, giving it an already pre-existing meaning and therefore providing primarily identifiable instances through the point of view of the camera, and secondarily identifiable occurrences through the characters of the storyline [5, p. 178]. However, these realities are illuminated in certain ways as to visually transform them, by implementing concepts from Freud and Lacan on psychoanalytical and phenomenological aspects for purposes of power manipulation [6, pp. 123–126].

Kucumbu Tubuh Indahku is an Indonesian movie, therefore representing the reality of Indonesian traditions and society. It's telling of a *Lengger Lanang* dancer's life story reinforces the apparatus theory of films being a representation of identifiable realities and ideologies. The *Lengger* dance and existence of *Lengger Lanang* troupes has been present in Indonesian history for several years, and although no specific information of the exact date of its establishment is known, the traditional dance is considered to have originated from local Banyumas culture as both a form of entertainment and ritual in the celebration of fertility (2019). In this more modern era, *Lengger* is identified as a form of art containing cross-gendered dancers which has almost become extinct due to new social norms [7]. Throughout history, these forms of art have not only been used for ritualistic purposes, but also as a symbol of representation and appreciation towards varying gender and sexualities throughout Indonesia, however, as seen from more recent events, more severe consequences have been dispersed in relation to issues on these topics [8]. Criminalization is one of the consequences appointed to people within the LGBT+ community [8], and further actions for the prevention of the spread of such allegedly corrupting traits is through the blockage of information on anything regarding those themes. This can be related to events in which screenings of *Kucumbu Tubuh Indahku* were boycotted and stopped due to its LGBT themes, although already having passed the required regulations.

2. Foucauldian Discourse Analysis

The work of Michel Foucault in the field of critical discourse is evocative for his postulation in which he inserts linguistics into a political sphere. He argues that the use of language and behaviour in societal lives signifies a greater sense of effort to secure power or domination [9, p. 21]. Discourse is being used in everyday lives, whether by individuals who get involved in the communication process in their own social circles or by definite parties who ideologically campaign their beliefs and values in order to embed it within society's intellection. The process of discourse cannot be easily perceived as one may syntagmatically analyze the structure of an utterance. Discourse analysis tries to delve into the underlying structure in the form of cultural and political aspects that governs all kinds of communication processes [10]. Within Foucault's comprehension, discourse can be used to thoroughly examine the governmental system that regulates knowledge in a certain culture, inferring it as a cultural

statutory that assesses what is right and what is not [11, p. 128]. In other words, discourse analysis attempts to delve and construe all of the intangible aspects that build a certain cultural text by means of thorough concerns in regards to social, historical, and ideological aspects.

Many academics think that Foucauldian Discourse Analysis is not a concrete method to analyze cultural texts. Foucault's reluctance to initiate a formulation about his perception towards discourse may further strengthen one's criticism of Foucauldian Discourse Analysis [12]. However, the conception of discourse in Foucault's eye opens a wide range of useful ideas for researchers to stimulate a hypothesis of power pertaining to the intangible structure that regulates the dynamic of media and culture. Although it can be agreed that discourse in Foucault's outlook is somewhat an abstract concept, the underlying emphasis on how a narration represents a power's intervention in any actions enlightens critical thinking in the analysis of implicit cultural dominion.

ANALYSIS

There are two kinds of boycotting launched toward the release of *Kucumbu Tubuh Indahku*, namely through physical and digital boycotting. The term "physical" means that there is a direct encounter between the opposing side and the object in which it is being protested. This encounter can be in the form of forced disbandment of any kinds of events related to the object such as an event of watching the movie together, and in the form of mass demonstration. While as for the "digital" boycotting means that the efforts in thwarting the existence of the object are done through the medium of the virtual world. The most prominent platform used in this kind of movement is Change.org. It is an online petition platform that any internet user can use to easily insert their votes on a certain matter. The use of Change.org in the contemporary technological era is pivotal in countering a power-play deemed as a disruption in society. The free and global-reach natures are the most prominent factors that cause digital-social activism to develop [13].

As for the case of *Kucumbu Tubuh Indahku*, the digital backlash starts from the petitions that frame the film as a negative phenomenon for the morals of Indonesia's youth and emphasizing that it solely deals within the topic of LGBT.



Figure 1: Online petition to ban the film (source: Change.org)

In the narration above, it is argued that *Kucumbu Tubuh Indahku* cannot be accepted in Indonesia due to the main focus of LGBT that is unharmonious to the religious-cultural values

that Indonesia holds. The initiator of the petition also states that *Kucumbu Tubuh Indahku* refers to a sexual activity that depicts the entirety of the film. There is a second online petition that frames the film in the same manner.



Figure 2: Another online petition with the same intention (source: Change.org)

Similar to the first petition example, this petition depicts the film as heavy in its LGBT themes. It is threatening to the identity-troubled Indonesian youth or the next generation to be easily influenced practising the LGBT values within Indonesia. The launcher also argues that film should have crafted arts that have positive effects that are inspiring to the young people of the country.

The adjectives "positive" and "inspiring" (fig. 2), and the exclusion in mentioning local culture that are embedded within the films done by the launchers create a stigma in which the film solely glorifies the notion of LGBT in Indonesia. A framing approach attacks the concept of body that the film portrays by rigidly stating that the norms for one's identity is either *tulen* (real man/woman) as the acceptable idea or other states that are considered inappropriate and demoralizing. Both of these narratives somehow resemble acts of cancel culture which have recently become the manner in judging certain events or things that one disagrees with. It is a free and irresponsible act generated without logical and empirical basis to justify it [14], [15]. It is found that cancel culture can be perceived as a new form of mass entertainment [16]. The act of cancelling something that is somewhat unsuited for a utopian thought can be included into what Foucault proposed as a way to govern knowledge.

The framing of the boycotts of *Kucumbu Tubuh Indahku* prominently depicts the film as an unbecoming medium for mass to consume. The nature "unbecoming" or in another word "inappropriate" in here does not represent the media's position in perceiving the film as a cultural text that is somewhat unparalleled to the media's ideology itself, rather the media mostly reports the accounts in a manner of conveying the occurrence of a particular event that is strongly opposed by a mass organization engaged in a religious tenet. To simply put it, the media tries to be neutral in portraying the raids of *Kucumbu Tubuh Indahku's* screenings and bans by several municipal governments in Indonesia. The framing by media and the acts launched by municipal government and religious mass organization further exhibits the strictness of values the opposing sides pose and the counter-hegemonic efforts in order to surmount a new cultural text that is subconsciously interpreted also as a hegemonic effort to undermine the nation's value as a whole.

Alasan LGBT, Film 'Kucumbu Tubuh Indahku' Ditolak FPI

Devy Octaviany - detikHot

Senin, 18 Sep 2019 09:20 WIB



Figure 3: The reporting of banning towards the film (source: DetikHot)

ENTERTAINMENT

'Kucumbu Tubuh Indahku', poetic ode to the human body

STANLEY WIDIANTO
THE JAKARTA POST

Jakarta / Wed, February 20, 2019 / 02:56 pm

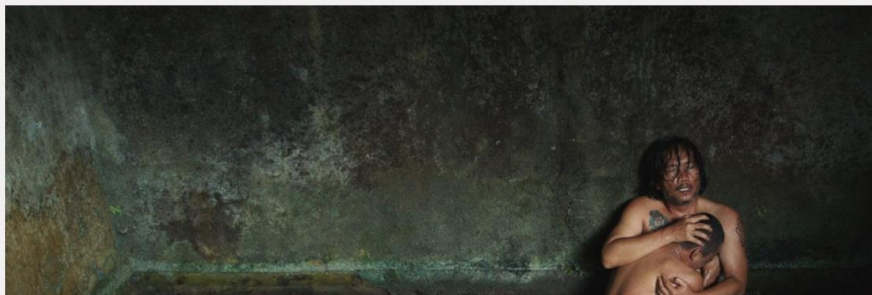


Figure 4: An article which depicts the film in an embracing manner (source: JakartaPost)

The contestation of ideologies between the repellent and proponent represents the existence of how both hegemonic forces try to obtain the entirety consensus. The representation by media is a constructivist effort to produce a new order of meaning [17], that if it is widely consumed and accepted, it will be legitimized as an essential value to hold and not to be questioned [18]. Disclosure of whether the text itself is objectively beneficial or just partially contenting for certain parties is an endless quest for an ideal cultural environment.

Positioning the backlash of *Kucumbu Tubuh Indahku* within the field of discourse necessitates one to perceive it as a configuration with various elements shaping its core content, it can be linked into a film discourse and a historical mapping about the cultural content that the film brings, and on the other hand as a constitution for public's acceptance in which the media play a pivotal role in spreading a narrative which later controls how the public judge it. The role of the media in shaping a contentious portrayal has already been discussed by presenting how several Indonesian media frame their news in a particular language manner. However, the perception of *Kucumbu Tubuh Indahku* as a piece of Indonesian cultural products should be further analyzed within the discourses of its forms. Film work needs to be considered

as a form of cultural text that must be considered in depth to maintain the overall practices and values that it carries.

The high number of boycotts that are aimed to *Kucumbu Tubuh Indahku* carry an unnoticeable threat not only to the existence of the film itself but also to the epistemic of both the film culture and the content of the film which entangles certain local culture forms. The narration of the boycotts may particularly imply one's hope to demolish the values contained within the theme of *Kucumbu Tubuh Indahku*. This, as mentioned previously, refers to a greater indication of power relation and domination in a play. Definite parties in the context of religious tenet try to encase the film as a text with threatening moralities for the nation's values. It is contrastive when being compared to the fact that the film itself receives many critical acclaim and accolades from Indonesian film award organizers such as Citra Award and Festival Film Indonesia. Viewing from this actuality, it begs a second look and thorough questions about Indonesian contemporary culture dynamic. If one rigidly resists the existence of the film for it is considered threatening to the nation's morality, whilst the other defends it for in their own artistic and cultural comprehension it is an untroubled matter and therefore should be appreciated, it suggests an existence of ethnocentric act within this ideological contention. Ethnocentrism is an act wherein a certain culture values itself as the sole norm that needs to be applied and considers itself as a preferable way of life compared to other cultures outside the space in which this culture is located or even other cultures that exist within the very same sphere of this culture [19, p. 47]. Both parties endlessly negotiate their agenda and ideologies, hoping that a universal consensus can be reached. Though it is almost impossible to obtain the essential "truth", if one is looking for it. The circumstance points out that Indonesian people are very divided in judging this matter further delineates the essentialist approach Indonesia's perspective has in terms of recognizing a cultural text. This notion is postulated by Ignas Kleden [20]. Essentialist culture, such as Indonesians, prefer to recline on a certain value or belief that can be based on religious or other concepts and rigidly subsists within the boundary of that very concept, whereas the non-essentialist party is consistently negotiating its cultural core whenever new or modern discourses emerge and need to be looked at [20, pp. 42–43]. The approach of non-essentialist should be critically applied to observe certain cultural matters such as in this one and in order to maintain cultural sustainability.

CONCLUSION

It is important to consider *Kucumbu Tubuh Indahku* as a reflection of reality in its truest sense. A new form of cultural text that tries to preserve the existence of Cinema, or film, is an audio-visual simulacrum of reality, whether concretely or ideologically [21, pp. 8–10]. One of the natures of cinema is as a reproduction medium of social elements, and the contents embedded within the plot are inherently social [22]. It tries to function as a medium for other people to witness a fragment of culture that exists in a particular area in the world. Therefore, based on the Apparatus Theory, aggression towards a film's theme connotes one's refutation in embracing diverse beliefs and norms within one's own arena of culture since the film mirrors what really exists within the space of reality. A repudiation of an existence of certain culture, in this context, is the notion of film as a reflection of reality and the contents of *Kucumbu Tubuh Indahku* (*Lengger Lanang and Reog*), may lead to a diminishing of people's comprehension and awareness towards the subjects. This undeniably stigmatizes the concept of film and local culture respectively. Furthermore, it may even force the total eradication of both discourses if an ideological reconsideration is not considered.

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