



IR-UI COMMENTARIES

IR-UI Commentaries is a platform for academics of the Department of International Relations, Universitas Indonesia (IR-UI) to share their thought on issues related to the study of international relations. The ideas are presented from the perspective of International Security, International Political-Economy, Transnational Society, or the multidimensional approaches across the three clusters. It is jointly published by the IR-UI and Centre for International Relations Studies (CIReS) - Faculty of Social and Political Sciences Universitas Indonesia. Analysis presented here represent the views of the author(s) and not the institutions they are affiliated with, the IR-UI and CIReS-UI.

vol. I / no. 13 | December 2020

Locating the Human in Film: the Politics and Aesthetics of A Capitalistic Global Industry

Author: Avyanthi Aziz¹, Lisabona Rahman²

Summary³

For those trained in International Relations (IR), the world of cinema might be highly relatable, in particular because the structure of the film domain itself is reminiscent of the abstracted international system we learned in classrooms. Film is situated, where politics, capital, and culture meet. This entanglement means that film embodies several things at once. In this respect, to practice film in IR also means to seriously regard, and bring back into play, critical perspectives that the discipline has largely ignored following the triumph of liberalism in the aftermath of the Cold War. We explicitly offer Indonesia as a positionality, in navigating the spatial dimensions and various levels of the global industry. We assert its use a lens to clarify the potentials and challenges in doing film and IR.

Keywords: *film industry, postcolonial, visual International Relations*

¹ Lecturer at Department of International Relations, Universitas Indonesia

² Consultant, Film Preservation and Restoration

³ This edition is the output of 'DefiningNurani a Dialogue Series on Human Security' held by the IR-UI as part of its 35th Anniversary celebrations, and supported by its Alumnae Association (ILUNI HI-UI), series 10, titled: "Human Security dalam Industri Film Global", with Lisabona Rahman (Speaker), Yeremia Lalisang, Ph.D (Discussant), and Avyanthi Aziz, M.Sc (Host). http://tiny.cc/irui_dn10.

The Promise of Visual International Relations

How do films relate to the discipline of international relations (IR)? Growing literature on the subject points to film's predominant use as a pedagogical tool in classrooms. However, the series of turns in IR—the practice turn, the aesthetic turn, the visual turn—have brought forth serious consideration about the possibility of engaging with the medium in a more volitional mode: to enter the field of narration, not through text as we are predisposed to do, but through the visual.

For those trained in IR, the world of cinema might be highly relatable, in particular because the structure of the film domain itself is reminiscent of the abstracted international system we learned in classrooms. Film is situated, where politics, capital, and culture meet. This entanglement means that film embodies several things at once. It is simultaneously a political statement, a trade commodity, a cultural product. IR as a science combines multiple perspectives along the same line, and its signature level of analysis presents a well-suited tool in navigating the multiple tiers that the film industry encompasses. For those inclined to praxis, cinema is particularly appealing because it offers a canvass for furthering movement or activism.

It is hardly surprising then that more politically-engaged IR scholars are now advancing film as a practice. Beyond being a tool for communicating research, film is a research method in its own right (Harman 2019). We can employ it to productively address ontology (ways of being in the world) and epistemology (ways of seeing or looking at the world). Indeed, visual IR is catching up with visual anthropology, visual sociology, visual criminology, etc. disciplines that have grappled earlier with everyday life). With specific regard to human security (the people-centered approach highlighted in this web discussion series), film offers a chance at a meaningful representation of the human experience, especially with its capacity to capture both the particular and the universal. Film offers a real avenue to investigate affect, bodily sense and experience (Callahan 2015). Without a doubt, it can be a very powerful means for writing the human in a world/discipline dominated by security and capital.

Indonesia as a Positionality: Seeing from A Postcolonial/Critical Vantage Point

But are we equal in film's field of narration? Power, the central concept in IR, defined as, "...the production, in and through social relations, of effects that shape the capacities of actors to determine their circumstances and fate" (Barnett & Duvall 2005), immediately becomes pertinent, as we contemplate film from our peripheral, as well as postcolonial vantage point. On one hand, film is a medium that can gain us entry to the core. As artistic representations, they often succeeded in penetrating the privileged North's understanding of the global South. On the other hand, film's particular nature as a *costly* art form confronts us with real questions about access—who gets to practice film-making—and whether narrative power could emerge without material wealth behind it.

As scholars have asserted, no other theoretical perspective addressed the particular disquiet about how material and ideational worlds are interrelated in clearer terms than Marxism (Smith 2013). In this respect, to practice film in IR also means to seriously regard, and bring back into play, critical perspectives that the discipline has largely ignored following the triumph of liberalism in the aftermath of the Cold War. We explicitly offer Indonesia as a positionality, in navigating the spatial dimensions and various levels of the global industry. We assert its use

a lens to clarify the potentials and challenges in doing film and IR, as delineated in the section below.

War on Two Fronts: Battling Domestic Censorship and American Hegemony

Historically, three features have plagued the Indonesian film industry: absence of a supportive infrastructure, a regulative framework that centers on censorship, and partiality to large-scale investors. These have resulted in a cinematic monoculture, much like the monocrops we see prevalent in plantations today. The Indonesian film industry is effectively in a state of being trapped in an enclosure, where only certain kinds of films are being produced. This leads to the predicament, where 90% of quality Indonesian films are financed by international funding, which comes in the forms of grant, or capital investment. Take for example, the widely acclaimed film, *Marlina the Murderer in Four Acts* (2017). While deeply local in content, its production and distribution were cosmopolitan, as they rested on a wide array of international support. It received financial grant and funding from Thai-based Purin Pictures and France's Aide aux Cinémas du Monde. Film dies without circulation (without people viewing them, they are just dead products)—and so, the film greatly benefited from the various platforms and festivals: Malaysia's Astro Shaw, Singapore's HOOQ, Berlin's TALENTS, Tokyo's Filmex, as well as Asian Shadows, a French distributor operating in Asia.

At the same time, the Indonesian state has allowed dominance of American films to take strong hold on consumption, dictating what gets to be viewed and for how long. An extreme illustration of this was how Tjoet Nja' Dhien, which was screened at Cannes, only enjoyed limited circulation in domestic theatres.

Of course, people have fought back against the system. To some extent, film festivals like JiFFest that made their rounds and were in vogue in the late 1990s/early 2000s, opened up space for resistance, and *counterculture*. Beyond providing alternate cinematic experience (enabling locals to view films like *Persepolis*), these festivals also allowed an educational and organizing platform for local film makers, facilitating interaction and dialogue with others, especially in Southeast Asia. Around the same time, we saw Indonesian film makers pushing the boundaries, especially with the emergence of films such as Rizal Mantovani's *Kuldesak*. Film makers also rose against censorship, notably when they took it up before the Constitutional Court as an infringement of *cultural expression*, emphasizing lack of protection of this particular human right in our country.

The State as Cinematic Vanguard

The landscape of film continues to evolve, and along the way we have indeed witnessed changes, whether in the proliferation of platforms, such Netflix, or in policy—the landmark being the Jokowi administration's decision to lift previous restriction on foreign investment in a number of sectors, including film. Real change, we would argue, requires something beyond these developments. It inevitably calls on the Indonesian state—as *embodiment of the collective*—to take up an active role as vanguard of culture.

Let us consider first the rise of Netflix. A crucial thing that we must examine is whether the platform has encouraged more genres, or allowed for more meaningful shift. We tend toward the former, as we believe that positionality pertains more to being critical—that is, showing attentiveness to larger structures, macro-contexts that shape our experiences of the world

rather than delivering critiques of mainstream culture. We would argue that attending to the structures that support the narratives is far more important than the narratives themselves. Second, with regard to the *daftar negatif investasi* (DNI), the decision to remove film from the “negative investment list” would amount to little in the absence of a meaningful *cultural* policy. Considering that the list essentially enumerates commodities or industrial products, in itself, the decision to open up to foreign investors can be disastrous. If not accompanied by clear measures that affirm our positionality in the global industry/international system, free flow of investment bears the risk of further relegating us the receiving end of the “global media flow” (Thussu 2012).

We can learn from the European experience after the World War II, when film festivals really surfaced as an invaluable circuit for quality local films (which would otherwise would not be able to compete with their Hollywood competitors). With state’s subsidy, festivals became a geopolitical strategy to balance the influence of local industries in the wake of dominant American capital influx, allowing European arthouse cinemas to survive and thrive. Festivals are thus strategic in how they ensure an arena that is not completely regulated by market logic and overrun by capital.

Of course, festival is but an example of a proactive measure. Supportive, non-market-oriented policies can come in other forms. One major point to highlight is that in the realm of film, capital entails not only cost production, it also involves intangible things. From the state, the most important would be: *acknowledgement* of its cultural value, and the humanistic efforts of its practitioners. ***

References

- Barnett, Michael, and Raymond Duvall. "Power in international politics." *International Organization* 59, no. 1 (2005): 39-75.
- Callahan, William A. "The visual turn in IR: documentary filmmaking as a critical method." *Millennium* 43, no. 3 (2015): 891-910.
- Harman, Sophie. *Seeing politics: film, visual method, and international relations*. McGill-Queen's Press, 2019.
- Smith, Steve. "Six wishes for a more relevant discipline of international relations," in Robert E. Goodin, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Political Science*. 2008.
- Thussu, Daya Kishan, ed. *Media on the move: global flow and contra-flow*. Routledge, 2006.

Editor-in-Chief

Dwi Ardhanariswari, Ph.D. (riris.sundrijo@ui.ac.id)

Editorial Board

Ali A. Wibisono, Ph.D. ▪ Asra Virgianita, Ph.D. ▪ Broto Wardoyo, Ph.D.

Managing Editor

Ardhitya Eduard Yeremia, Ph.D.

Editorial Secretary

Annisa Dina Amalia, MIR

Staff

Arivia Tri Dara Yuliestiana, M.Si ▪ Ivan Sanjaya ▪ Ayuni Yustika



Department of International Relations
Faculty of Social and Political Sciences Universitas Indonesia

☎ (+62 21)-7873-744 ✉ internationalrelations@ui.ac.id

🌐 www.ir.fisip.ui.ac.id

📧 @internationalrelationsui

🐦 @ir_fisipui

