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A Conversation with Indonesian Filmmaker Candra Aditya

Candra Aditya

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Abstract

This interview with the Indonesian filmmaker Candra Aditya reflects on several months of collaborative work with a small group of scholars specializing in film, language, religion, and culture. In addition to remarks on the short film *Dewi pulang*, the discussion also addresses a range of more general issues pertaining to filmmaking in post-authoritarian Indonesia.

Keywords

cinema – short films – cinema – Indonesia – Java – Jakarta

The following text presents a conversation with filmmaker Candra Aditya, after several months of our working together collaboratively with Thomas Barker, Rosalia Namsai Engchuan, and Verena Meyer. The project began with a proposal for a film screening and round table at the 2020 AAS-in-Asia conference in Kobe, Japan. We had planned to discuss options for publication at the conference. But when the Covid-19 pandemic struck, it quickly became apparent that our panel would not be meeting in person. So, we decided to take our collaboration online. This was in the early days of the transition to Zoom meetings and working remotely, and it required a bit of coordination, not least given our various locations around the globe—including Jakarta (Candra), Kuala Lumpur (Thomas), Berlin (Rosalia), New York (Verena), and British Columbia (myself). Aided by newly available communications technologies—and the

attendant habituation to online conversation—the five of us came together as an informal working group that kept up a lively correspondence, meeting several times online to share and comment on one another's work. I think we all learned a lot from the experience.

In conversation, Thomas remarked that 'our cross-border, supportive, and project-based collaboration was both productive and rewarding', going on to note that 'academic work thrives when we talk, collaborate, give feedback and suggestions, in small, focused settings'. Developing a related theme, Rosalia described her essay as a response to earlier and ongoing conversations with Candra, emphasizing the importance of bringing those conversations directly into her writing. On her account, this entailed an effort to go beyond one's own assumptions, to question 'preconceived concepts', and 'to learn from (and unlearn with) what we encounter'—even if that may at times mean allowing things to remain 'opaque or contradictory'. Reflecting on this process, Verena recalled the importance of our first conversation online as a group, and how Candra's remarks on the letter Dewi had received from her father helped to shape the argument that eventually became her essay. She also noted the way Rosalia's work on film as a 'relational network' made her 'think seriously about how I, as a viewer of the film—or my article, which I go on to write—or the people who will then read it—are part of this network'. As she put it, 'our scholarly work is not just a meta-commentary, but in a way part of the same conversation'. For my part, our work together taught me a great deal about short filmmaking in Indonesia but also about the critical potential of collaborative enquiry. It would be trite to say our little group's work amounted to more than the sum of its parts—and yet, that is the case. Indeed, the strength of our collaboration ought not to be measured in quantity or 'deliverable' output but rather by the open-ended quality of dialogue—and the way it has created new possibilities for future conversation. It is our hope that this collaborative exchange might provide an impetus to similar work—both among ourselves and possibly for others.

RF: It was a great pleasure to work with you on this collection of essays, Candra, and to learn a bit more about your filmmaking. But, before turning to *Dewi pulang*, I wanted to ask how you became interested in making films in the first place. Where did you get your start? And what was it about film that attracted you?

CA: I had a pretty rough childhood. My father was away and my mother wasn't there for me emotionally. My sister stayed at my grandmother's (on my father's side of the family). So, I was alone most of the time. But my father was always

sending me books and comics. I remember it was those books that saved me—they helped me not to feel so lonely all the time. Then my aunt introduced me to *Lupus*, which was one of the most famous teen book series at the time. *Lupus* introduced me to this kind of fun and easy-going, pop-culture-filled literature that I'd never read before. It was really because of *Lupus* that I felt I could write my own stories. *Lupus* also introduced me to a lot of films I wouldn't otherwise have known, because Hilman loved to drop pop culture references into his writing.¹ So, for example, he'd mention in passing that *Lupus*—the main character—wasn't scared even though he'd just watched [RF: the American horror film] *A nightmare on Elm Street* (Craven 1984). As a 10-year-old boy who'd never even heard of Freddy Krueger [RF: the serial killer from *A nightmare*], the reference grabbed my attention. And when I went to the video rental shop, and saw a copy of the film, I was excited and decided to rent it. This happened every time Hilman mentioned the title of a popular film, or even the name of an actor. In fact, I think it was Hilman who first introduced me to Brad Pitt. So, I started watching films. The turning point was in April 2005, when I watched *Janji Joni* (Anwar 2005) for the first time. And it was then that I decided being a filmmaker was the best job you could possibly have—because you get to entertain people. I want people to experience the feeling I felt that day.

RF: Why *Janji Joni*? What was it about this film that caught your attention? Was filmmaking really just about entertainment, as you seem to suggest? Or was there more to it?

CA: I think it was because *Janji Joni* was so unlike any Indonesian film that I'd seen before. It was fresh. It felt young and very modern. It's a really funny movie. Maybe I was feeling sad at the time, and seeing *Janji Joni* made me forget that I was sad. But I remember that at the end of the film it also made me want to be like Joko Anwar.² I wanted people to forget their problems—at least for a short while, when they're watching my film.

RF: Not unlike Joko Anwar's *Janji Joni*, I've noticed your films often make explicit reference to other films—either to frame the narrative or provide context for social commentary. What should we make of the way Dewi and her friends responded to *Ayat-ayat cinta* at the café—a film that, on release, was for a brief time Indonesia's biggest-ever box office success?

1 RF: Hilman Hari Wijaya (b. 1970) was the author of the popular series *Lupus*.

2 RF: Joko Anwar (b. 1976) is one of Indonesia's leading young filmmakers.

CA: I like to put pop culture references in everything that I make—short films, web series, novels, and even articles—because I think pop culture is the one thing that unites us. Films, songs, movie stars, singers, models. These are the things that we have in common, despite our different backgrounds, different cultures. If I mention the film *Ada apa dengan Cinta* (Soedjarwo 2002), for example, one of the most famous Indonesian coming-of-age films, it doesn't matter where you're from—if you're Indonesian, you're immediately going to think of [RF: the film's lead couple] Cinta and Rangga. And I like that. As for *Ayat-ayat cinta* (Bramantyo 2008), well, I think I put that reference into *Dewi pulang* because it pushes in exactly the opposite direction. And so it's perfect for the scene. We see Dewi and her friends in this chic café, smoking and drinking beer. While, by contrast, *Ayat-ayat cinta* is literally about a young Muslim 'saviour' who, for all his struggles, always seems to be doing the right thing. I think Dewi and her friends (just like me! lol) think of that film as a total fiction—as unreal as sci-fi. He's just too good to be true.

RF: Can you tell us a little bit more about the background of *Dewi pulang*? Why it was that you wanted to make this film? And why it took the form that it did?

CA: I wanted to make the film because I really liked the idea of an unconventional mother–daughter relationship. In Indonesia, especially in Java (and also in Islam), your mother is the figure you respect the most. One could say everything happens because of the mother. She's the one who builds the family. And I liked the idea of a story where the main character felt that her mother wasn't like that. In this story the mother is the enemy. I feel more at home with this idea, and that's why I decided to make the film. So, at the beginning, I framed Dewi's mother as the enemy.

In an earlier draft [RF: of the screenplay], the role of Dewi's mother didn't change through the course of the film. Their relationship remained the same from beginning to end. But, in the final draft, I decided to allow Dewi's perception of her mother to change. She became more accommodating towards her mother in the end. And, in fact, this change [RF: in the screenplay] was influenced by a real letter that my own father had given me at the time of his death. Her mother was still the enemy. And maybe even after the film ended her mother would've still behaved the same way. But I changed the way Dewi reacted to her mother's behaviour. As a daughter who loves her father very much, I wanted to show the sacrifice Dewi was willing to make in order to honour her father's last wish.

RF: Thomas Barker's essay offers a historical perspective on the transformation of independent cinema and short filmmaking in Indonesia. How would you situate *Dewi pulang*—and your filmmaking more generally—in that context? What continuities, if any, do you feel with filmmakers working earlier in the post-authoritarian era? And now? What do you feel distinguishes your work from theirs?

CA: I think the idea for this film would've been considered 'dangerous' if someone had tried to make it before 1998—because the 'baby boom' generation would've seen Dewi's action throughout the film as a sign of rebelliousness. I don't think I've ever seen this type of female character in Indonesian film before 1998. That is, someone who was brave enough to question authority (the mother), and to do things that aren't considered feminine—such as smoking and drinking.³

The New Order never affected me the way it affected older filmmakers. This is a terrible example ... but I hate films where the character is depicted as if they're preaching on screen, most of the time verbally. And I see a lot of this in older Indonesian filmmakers' work. When their character does something outside the norm, usually they preach. And I hate that. I always try to avoid that when I make short films. Take, for example, a film like *Virgin* (2004, Hanny R. Saputra). It's about three girls who live dangerously, and who basically don't care about anything. The filmmaker was trying to give an accurate depiction of youthful life in Jakarta. As much as I love the film (and it's true, I'm obsessed with it!), the filmmaker is still trying to preach that virginity matters. When the main character, Biyan (played by Laudya Cynthia Bella), ends the film with a proclamation that she's a virgin, the rest of the characters in the film, including all of the extras, just scream in ecstasy. They are so happy to hear that the main character is still a virgin. And it just drives me nuts. I hate it.

Because this film was made more recently, the situations shown in *Dewi pulang* can be seen as nothing that's really out of the ordinary. However, if this film were made before 1998, I think one would've had to be more careful in terms of talking about tradition versus a more modern outlook. For example, I would've had to be more careful in how I portrayed the way Dewi's mother tried to maintain Javanese funerary traditions (for example, the rituals performed up to 100 days), while the younger generation just wants to do everything more

3 RF: It is worth noting here that, at least as I understood him, Candra did not mean to suggest that Indonesian cinema had never portrayed rebellious female characters prior to 1998. Rather, the emphasis was on Dewi's specific style of resistance, and the way it was portrayed in the film—positively, and as 'brave'.

simply and quickly. It would've been difficult in part because the government was more involved in these things back then.⁴ But now there's more freedom. *Dewi pulang* can get away with being a bit 'in your face'. It's blunt. There are no hidden symbols. You can take what's happening at face value. Sure, there are some things you may miss if you're not familiar with Javanese family traditions and culture. But the rebellion against authority is exactly what it appears to be.

RF: Rosalia Namsai Engchuan's essay more directly addresses the *komunitas film* scene as collaborative in nature and networked both within Indonesia and beyond. How would you characterize your experience working in this milieu? With specific reference to *Dewi pulang*, to what extent does the filmmaking context shape the resulting film? And what are some of the more consequential ways in which *komunitas film* differs from more mainstream cinema in Indonesia?

CA: I'm the kind of person who likes to work with the same people on a regular basis, especially in the camera department. Interestingly enough, even though almost all of my short films were shot by Bemby Saputro, this was the first time I got to work with him as a director. I knew him as a cameraman when we worked together in 2013.

When I choose people to work as the crew for my film, I tend to use people who are fun and easy to get along with—meaning that I don't want people who get angry quickly, or are temperamental on the set. Shooting a film requires long hours in close quarters. I don't want friction. I need people I can rely on. I need people who have the same vibe as me. That is why I like Bemby Saputro, because he's chill. Directors of photography are infamous for their temperament, especially in Indonesia. But Bemby Saputro is not like that at all. I often take skills to be second in importance. I don't need someone who's like [RF: the well-known cinematographer] Emmanuel Lubezki. If you're decent and you're cool, I will pick you. I don't need more drama on my set. Bemby Saputro is not only chill, but he also helps me when I encounter unexpected problems on the set. And exchanging ideas with him is really easy and natural. When I explain my ideas, he understands what I mean immediately.

Even though I haven't necessarily joined a 'komunitas film', I work with the same people over and over again—and so I tend to think of these people as my own 'community'. And, with *Dewi pulang*, I really liked working with my community because of their input. They'd tell me if they disagreed, or perhaps had

4 RF: See Hanan (2017:12) for a historical study of 'cultural specificity and cultural and political resistance in Indonesian cinema'.

a different idea regarding the design of the film from a camera perspective, or in terms of production design. So, for example, in *Dewi pulang* I did not intend to use the well behind the house, during the scene when Dewi's aunt caught her smoking. In my earlier draft, I imagined her walking over to clean the dishes. Or something like that. When we first scouted the location, it was Bemby who suggested that we use the well. And I thought it was an interesting idea. But the well in the backyard wasn't fitted with the pulley, rope, and bucket you need if you want to draw water. So, in order to make the scene work, our production designer, Ewing Adhaksa, had to set up the pulley and bucket!

That's just one example. I think the way *komunitas film* works is more open-ended and freeing than mainstream cinema—meaning you don't have to cater to the producer's wishes or the market's demand. When you make a commercial work, you have to think about the market. You have to pick a famous actress; you have to write about something that will interest a large number of filmgoers. (In Indonesia, that's most likely going to be a religious drama or even a ghost story).⁵ When you make something like *Dewi pulang*, you don't have to think about any of this. I can make a film that's 80% in the Javanese language—something mainstream cinema can't do because their films need to prioritize accessibility. They don't want to alienate the audience.

RF: Rosalia cites you as having said 'Dewi is 75% me', which, given our conversation to date, makes a great deal of sense. And yet it also glosses over the gender-specific nature of Dewi's predicament—and the way she is addressed by her family. How might the story have been different if it had been *Joko pulang*? In other words, if Dewi had been a young man, would this have been a different film?

CA: I don't think the story would have the same impact. No one is going to care if Joko leaves home to work in Jakarta, because men can do whatever they like. They can work far away from home. Even if 'Joko' decided to stay in Jakarta—and to continue working, knowing that his father is sick—people would simply see him as a hard worker. Also, the idea that Joko was still single could be

5 RF: Accurate or otherwise, this observation regarding the preferences of Indonesian filmgoers is not uncommon. For example, Nia Dinata's comedy *Arisan!* (2003) has one of its central characters express a similar sentiment in casual conversation, noting that 'Indonesians have long enjoyed watching horror films'. His interlocutor, a young woman, is then made to ask, 'So, if an Indonesian filmmaker wants to make a commercial film, they've gotta make a horror film first, is that right?', to which the man replies matter-of-factly, 'Not necessarily. A comedy would also work.' Its self-referentiality aside, this was also of course before the rise to popularity of Islamic religious dramas.

taken to mean that he had focus. They'd think Joko is so determined to work hard—and to support his parents—that he doesn't have time to bother with his romantic life. By contrast, being a girl in a patriarchal country or tradition is a burden. And that's why this story is more persuasive if the main character is a woman.

To be honest, when I made *Dewi pulang*, my main goal was just to tell the story, and to entertain the audience. If the audience gets something from it, that's great. But, if they don't pick up on the nuance ... well, that's okay too. For example, after several screenings at various film festivals, I tried to show this film to my family. My family are the sort of people who regularly watch soap operas. They don't understand the nuance. At the end of the film, they just said, 'the girl is beautiful'. And I'm alright with that, too.

RF: In her contribution, Verena Meyer explores the complex relationship between Dewi's life in Jakarta and her family's life at home in Central Java, noting that '[e]ach place is haunted by the other'. Her essay reflects at some length on the way Dewi's presence in Jakarta—and so her absence from Central Java—enables life to carry on in the family home. But, recalling your own affinities with Dewi, I wondered whether you could talk a bit about the way her urban life in Jakarta would've been haunted by her 'home life' in Central Java?

CA: When you introduce yourself to a new person [RF: in Jakarta], people will ask where you live and where you're from. Of course, Dewi can lie and say she's a native Jakartan. But she'll always have that nagging feeling that she's not from here: she had a different childhood, memories, and culture. Those things will forever haunt her. When she talks with her friends about their memories, or their childhood, she will forever be reminded that she's not from here. Little things like that will always be embedded in her experience.

RF: Examining the transcript, and listening to the dialogue, one is struck by the varying styles of Javanese spoken by members of Dewi's immediate family. All else aside, this prevents one from linking the story to a specific Central Javanese location (for example, Yogyakarta, Solo, or even Banyumas). In conversation, you had mentioned this was a deliberate decision. What was the rationale for this?

CA: I didn't want the audience to know the exact location where the story took place. I'm not quite sure why. But, for me, the film somehow loses its fun if the audience knows where the story is taking place. In my mind, not knowing adds another mystery; it makes the story more interesting. Even after the film ends, I

want the audience to think, ‘So, who is she exactly? What sort of family would have this tradition?’

RF: In your remarks to Rosalia, as cited in her essay, you noted that your films address ‘things we don’t normally talk about’; ‘these are our stories’, stories of ‘Jakartan youth’, ‘this is how we are’. So, what’s next for Candra Aditya? What sort of films can we expect to see in the future? What issues will you be addressing?

CA: If you want to know the truth, I don’t plan to become a ‘serious’ filmmaker. I want to make something entertaining. I still think that *Dewi pulang* is entertainment. If the audience can take something away from seeing it, that’s great. But, again, I’m not planning to become a ‘serious’ filmmaker.

To be honest, I have several ideas about what I want to do next. I want to make a feature length version of *Carnivale*⁶ or *Terjebak*.⁷ I want to make a film where LGBT characters, independent women, and open-minded people can roam free in my frame without judgement.

RF: Verena, Rosalia, and Thomas have each mentioned to me how much they’ve learned through our collaboration—a sentiment I emphatically share. Is there anything you felt you may’ve learned through this process?

CA: Every time I set out to make a film I think to myself, ‘Is this good enough? Am I going to like it?’ Or, ‘I hope people will enjoy this film!’ I never analyse the content. But *Dewi pulang* was different. It is the only short film of mine that I hold dear to my heart. Not only do I have direct experience of its language and culture, but it is also my most personal film. Dewi is me.

Reading and discussing your essays made me see *Dewi pulang* differently. It’s been about nine years since I wrote the script, and five years since I shot the film. But it’s only now that I can see this film from a new perspective. When I watch my own films, I usually focus on the mistakes that I’ve made. I’m never satisfied. (But I guess almost every filmmaker feels this way about their own work!) However, after reading the papers, I feel both humbled and honoured at the same time—because every single one of you has seen my film from a different angle.

6 The short film *Carnivale* can be viewed online at <https://www.viddsee.com/video/carnivale/3wiob>. Accessed 29-04-2021.

7 Further details on the short film *Terjebak* are available online at <https://jaff-filmfest.org/jogja-future-project-2019/terjebak/>. Accessed 29-04-2021.

Thomas sees my work in the historical context of Indonesian short film-making. Based both on our conversations and the final product, Rosalia has analysed the way Indonesian indie film communities work. Verena does a wonderful job exploring the 'hidden things' that I put into the movie. And you understand the language even better than I do. It is so weird to read how people have interpreted my movie, and often in ways I'd never imagined. But I'm glad I was included!

RF: If you had to make a film about the members of our little working group—Thomas, Rosalia, Verena, me, and yourself—what sort of film would it be? Where would it take place? What would it be about? What issues would it address?

CA: Lol. Maybe a romance. A romantic comedy ... set in the academic world. We don't have one of those. Yet.

RF: Will look forward to seeing that. Lol. Thank you, Candra!

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