Distribution of Post-New Order Indonesian Non-Commercial Films: 
Case Studies of turah (2016) and prenjak (2016)

Muhammad Taufiqurrohman¹ & Tri Murniati¹

¹ Faculty of Humanities, Universitas Jenderal Soedirman, Jl. Dr. Soeparno Kampus Karangwangkal Purwokerto, Indonesia

Correspondence: Muhammad Taufiqurrohman, Faculty of Humanities, Universitas Jenderal Soedirman, Jl. Dr. Soeparno Kampus Karangwangkal Purwokerto, Indonesia. E-mail: muhammad.taufiqurrohman@unsoed.ac.id (62-821-3493-6253), tri.murniati@unsoed.ac.id (62-812-2526-0423)

Received: November 12, 2021; Accepted: June 28, 2022; Published: June 28, 2022

Abstract

This article discusses the distribution of two post-New Order Indonesian non-commercial films, namely Turah and Prenjak. Eclectic methods employed in this research consist of (1) a textual-descriptive method to reveal the message of the films in correlation with its distribution aspect, and (2) an ethnographic method with in-depth interview technique to reveal how the distribution of the two films is carried out. This article shows that the distribution of Turah and Prenjak has several similarities as well as differences. Thematically, they talk about the lives of the poor, though they use different angles. In terms of distribution, both utilize film festivals as the main distribution media, both at national and international levels. Turah and Prenjak also achieved recognitions at various film festivals. The striking difference is in the choice of film distribution and screening road shows. Turah entered mainstream cinema and benefited from road shows while Prenjak did neither. This is mainly due to sensitive scenes in Prenjak showing vagina and penis which makes the film unable to be widely screened. It was distributed only for film festivals and limited screenings. Meanwhile, Turah, which does not display any scenes related to pornography, has the flexibility in its distribution. This shows that as part of circuit of culture, film distribution—as an act to circulate the film’s vision and ideology—is closely related to the process of production, consumption and also regulation.

Keywords: distribution, non-commercial films, Prenjak, Turah

1. Introduction

Non-commercial films about poverty in Indonesia have colored Indonesian cinema after the New Order’s political exit. The films, which were mostly made by independent film activists, have successfully won awards at the national and international levels. Talking about these post-New Order films, Siti and Turah deserve mention. Both films have achieved numerous national and international recognitions such as Best Film at the 2015 Indonesian Film Festival (FFI) (Siti), Best Performance for Silver Screen Award at the 2014 Singapore International Film Festival (Siti), Best Scriptwriter at the 2015 Shanghai International Film Festival (Siti), Honorable Feature Mention at the Toronto Reel Asian International Film Festival 2015 (Siti), Special Mention at the 2015 Warsaw Five Flavors Film Festival (Siti), the Geber Award and the Netpac Award at the 2016 Jogja-Netpac Asian Film Festival (Turah), Special Mention at the 2016 Singapore International Film Festival (Turah), and in 2017 Turah represented Indonesia at the Academy Awards or Oscar. Both Siti and Turah are the work of the Fourcolours production house.

In addition to Fourcolours' production, there are also remarkable films produced by other production houses, such as Prenjak (2016), Ziarah (2016), Istirahatlah Kata-Kata (2017), Marlina Si Pembunuh dalam Empat Babak (2017), and etc. Prenjak, for example, has received extraordinary achievement as the best short film at the Cannes Film Festival in France in 2016. The success of the aforementioned films in various international festivals, to a certain extent, paved their way to enter commercial cinemas in the country (especially for feature films, because short films, such as Prenjak, despite their good quality, these films have difficulties entering mainstream commercial cinemas). Nonetheless, limited screened and viewers does not stop these festival films—films which are mostly intended to be screened at festivals—to mark a history in the world of Indonesian cinema. This indicates that festival films which are considered as "serious" (in the non-commercial sense) have got a place in the hearts of Indonesian film audiences. Ifa Isfansyah (2019) estimated that in the past, non-commercial films were difficult
to get 1000 viewers during their release period. However, currently these films are able to have 15000 viewers to 30000 viewers.

This success cannot be separated from the factor of film distribution done by the film workers, especially by the production houses and their networks. Distribution plays an important role in spreading Indonesian films to a wider audience network. One of the film distribution media networks that has proven to be the most effective is film festival, both national and international. Besides, cinema screening is still important for film appreciation with a wider audience. In addition, film distribution through road shows is still effective for certain types of films that rely on the film community network and civil society in general. In its development, digital technology has presented new channels in film distribution, namely online platforms such as Netflix, Iflix, Hooq, Genflix, Klikfilm, Viu, Catchplay, Vidio, Amazon Prime Video, Bioskoponline.com. and others. Last but not least, alternative cinemas—such as Kineroum, Kinosaurus, Cinespace, Sinema Sang Akar, and etc.—also play important role in distributing non-commercial films.

Amidst the growing appreciation of film in Indonesia, film distribution has proven to play a very vital role in the development of Indonesian films. However, film distribution, especially for non-commercial film, has not much researched yet. Cicilia Susanti (2017) carried out a research on non-commercial film distribution by discussing Siti's distribution channels in 2014-2016 in her thesis. Susanti identified four distribution channels used in the film, namely: (1) mainstream distribution (cinemas), (2) sidestream distribution (festivals), (3) offline platform sidestream (road shows), and (4) online platform sidestream (genflk.co.id and klikfilm.net).

Another research, conducted by Aditya K. Sueardi (2017), is about the distribution of independent film by Buttonijo, a distributor for independent films that has vision to make Indonesian films more varied. Sueardi concludes that the distribution of independent films by Buttonijo enables films to circulate in a wider area with no cinemas. This is because Buttonijo is working with independent film community networks and is supported by the internet media (website and social media). However, Buttonijo, which initially aims to circulate various films to the audience, is now acting like a mainstream cinema that purposely reject certain types of films for certain reasons.

Based on the above background, the discussion on film distribution is still limited and needs more exploration. Taking Turah and Prenjak as the case study, this article focuses on unraveling the distribution of these non-commercial Indonesian films. Both are taking the issue of poverty and gained national and international levels achievement.

2. Methods

This article is a cultural studies research that focuses on aspects of cultural distribution that cannot be separated from cultural production. Aaron Davis in his writing entitled “Investigating Cultural Producers” (in Pickering, 2008: 53) states that there are three main approaches in cultural production research, namely (1) a political economy approach, (2) a textual approach or text analysis, and (3) an ethnographic approach. /sociological. Based on this categorization, this study will only use and combine the two latter approaches and ignore the political economy approach. This neglect of the political economy approach was consciously chosen on the grounds that we have limited time and resources to research the political economy of Indonesian films.

Discussion on distribution of cultural products such as film, cannot be separated from the concept of circuit of cultures which includes production, consumption, regulation, representation, and identity. The connection between one element and another in the circuit of culture is a dialogical relationship and does not have a definite, complete and essential pattern. Distribution is a complex process which involves production and consumption as well as consumption and regulation, all of which cannot be separated from representation and identity. This is in line with Du Gay et al. (1997) that “taken together (these 5 points) complete a sort of circuit...through which any analysis of a cultural text...must pass if it is to be adequately studied.” This theoretical framework is employed to unravel the distribution of Turah and Prenjak.

To employ the theoretical framework above, eclectic descriptive method combining textual analysis and ethnographic method are applied. The textual-descriptive method is to reveal the message of the films in correlation with its distribution aspect while the ethnographic method with in-depth interview technique is to reveal how the distribution of the two films is carried out. What is meant by "text" here is not only limited to words (letters) but everything that contains meaning in the process of meaning (signification) by the reader of the text. Davis (in Pickering, 2008: 56-57) states that in conducting textual analysis, researchers try to uncover certain codes, terms, ideologies, discourses, and individuals who dominate the cultural output/product. The primary data is not only limited to the films (as texts) but also interview, news, articles, books, and other relevant sources. Within this theoretical and methodological lens, this article aims at drawing the correlation of the distribution of both films with its production, consumption, and regulation.
3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Distribution of Turah: From Film Festivals to Commercial Cinema

Turah (2016), directed by Wicaksono Wisnu Legowo (Wisnu) and produced by Fourcolours Film, has stolen Indonesian public's attention because of its several awards at several film festivals, including Special Mention at the Singapore International Film Festival (2016), Geber Award and NETPAC Award in Jogja-NETPAC Asian Film Festival (2016), Best Actor in the ASEAN International Film Festival and Award in Malaysia (2017). Furthermore, this film is also the representative of Indonesia to compete in the category for the Best Foreign Language Film Academy Award 2018. In short, Turah has its own charm which captures people’s attention.

Participating in numerous film festivals turns to be one major distribution media for Turah. In addition, this film was also released in mainstream cinema on August 16, 2017. Unlike commercial films, the gala premiere was not held in Jakarta or other big cities, but it was held in Tegal, a town where the film setting takes place. Interestingly, the film's director and actors are also Tegal people. The premiere was held at CGV Cinema Tegal on Sunday, August 13, 2017. Ifa Isfansyah as the film producer stated that distributing film on the mainstream cinema was the first step to get Turah a wider audience. In addition, he argued that Fourcolours wanted to present diversity so that Indonesian films could be conveyed in a variety of ways. Apart from festivals and cinemas, Turah is also distributed through road show screenings in various regions.


("This is what we offer in cinemas. I hope this film is a long-lived film. This means that the audience continues to be curious and curious about this film, so that there will be requests for screenings in various regions. Movies must meet the audience.")

Isfansyah underlines the needs of film to have viewers because by nature a movie should be viewed. Thus, cinema screening offers the opportunity to invite audience. This means multiple screenings at numerous places are needed to extend the life of a film.

Turah’s director, Wisnu, informed that despite receiving numerous awards, his film only got sixteen screens in commercial cinema. Although there is no requirement to win awards at a foreign film festival, there is a kind of "unwritten requirement" that festival films (which were originally non-commercial) must gain overseas recognitions before screened in domestic cinemas. Notwithstanding of its achievements at various festivals, Wisnu added, Turah only gets around seven thousand viewers. The longest running time—a fortnight screen—is in Tegal cinemas. Meanwhile, in other places, this film only lasts for a week.

Wisnu admitted that in the process of film production he was given a full trust by the producer, Ifa Isfansyah, to write the scenario and to direct the film. Meanwhile, the distribution of the film is entirely carried out by the producer. Wisnu said, "(It was) taken everywhere by the producer" (femaleradio.co, id, accessed September 4, 2020). In a personal interview, Wisnu added that all distribution processes are fully managed by the production house, including his schedules for attending various festivals and film promo events. As the director, Wisnu attended these various events according to the arranged schedule. Wisnu stated as follows:


("Yes, the Production House is the one that manages everything. All I know is that the house lists what cinemas or events I am scheduled for, for example, I have to come to Tegal. They also distribute the film to Twenty-One, decide the number of the screens in certain cinemas, negotiate again, and so on and so forth. That is the process. Yes, the more cinemas we have, the more copies we distribute. One hundred cinemas mean one hundred hard drives. The cost is so high that 16 cinemas need 16 hard drives. 15 million for one drive! The cinema doesn't just provide screens. They must also have their own calculations; they want profit.")

From Wisnu’s statement above, we can see that a director has limited role in the distribution process. On the contrary, he has a wider role in writing the script, selecting actors and shooting locations. This underlines that the
role of the producer and the film production house is significant, which includes the negotiation process with the screening organizers, both mainstream cinemas and alternative screening spaces such as film festivals or film discussions. The costs arising from the distribution process are borne entirely by the production house. Therefore, it can be said that the distribution process of *Turah* is the result of a negotiation process between the interests of the production house, both ideological and commercial, and the interests of the screening organizers, both commercial cinemas and alternative screenings.

As for the regulation of censorship by *Lembaga Sensor Film* (the Film Censorship Board), *Turah* easily gets approval because it does not contain sensitive issues such as racism or other controversial issues (in Indonesian context) like pornography and LGBT. However, the film is in the "13+" category, which means it is intended for viewers aged thirteen and over. The following is Wisnu’s account on this:


("There is a regulatory process. We must submit it to LSF (the censorship board). The film got approval. It was approved for the 13+ movie rating, I think. But nothing was censored. Those (Javanese) words that were considered rude… are all okay for them. No more problems and they welcomed words like *jancuk* and others.")

What is interesting about Wisnu's statement is the fact that the Javanese swear words, spoken by the characters in the film, are not considered inappropriate. However, the film is limited only to viewers aged “13+”. This indicates that LSF can understand the richness of the Javanese language in their contexts of use, including everyday vocabularies that are considered rude such as "*jancuk*, “*asu*”, and others.

Regarding the response of Tegal residents as the first viewers of *Turah*, Wisnu stated that many Tegal residents had been waiting for the film to be screened but many were dissatisfied with the ending because it did not meet their expectations. They expected to see a funny film, but in fact they saw a sad story. Some even disagreed with the poverty issue presented and protested why the movie did not show a "positive thing" like *Laskar Pelangi* (2008). However, when they heard one of the characters, Jadag, expressed his anger in Tegal-Javanese dialect, the audience were really amused. They seemed to enjoy seeing and hearing their daily exchanges entered the big screen.

### 3.2 Distribution of Prenjak: Festivals and Limited Screenings

Like *Turah*, *Prenjak* (In the Year of Monkey) (2016) has also received many achievements in the national and international film festivals. Its best achievement is winning the Best Short Film at the Semaine de la Critique 2016, Cannes Film Festival (www.bbc.com, accessed on 7 September 2020). This film is directed by a director from Yogyakarta, Wregas Bhanuteja (Wregas). Produced in 2016, according to the director, the film was made in one month with only two days shooting.

In an interview with Teppy O Meter Narasi TV program, Wregas said that this film was inspired by a true story told by his Indonesian Literature teacher at school, as story about the phenomenon of *ciblek* in the Yogyakarta square around the 1980s. It was told that at that time there were women who were selling *wedang ronde* (traditional drink) in the square and at the same time also selling one matchstick for one thousand rupiah for people to be able to see her vagina. Usually the customers of these special matches show are small children playing in the square. If the fire goes out due to the night wind, then the customers have to pay another one thousand rupiah. The women who sold matchsticks were usually called *ciblek*. The word *ciblek* itself means "cilik-cilik betah melek" (kids who enjoy staying up late) which refers to the incident when the eyes widen to see the female genitals in small flames swaying, swept away by the wind (www.narasi.tv accessed 2 September 2020).

Wregas also said that in the beginning the film would be titled *Ciblek*, but because it was aesthetically not appropriate, then the title *Prenjak* was chosen. The consideration is because *Ciblek* is also the name of a bird and the name of prenjak is considered relevant or represents a bird like that *ciblek*. In the process of research, it was only later found that the prenjak was a bird that only wanted to sing when a partner was present.

This story of the eighties was later developed by Wregas in *Prenjak*. This film tells the story of a single mother named Diah who is in need of money to meet her family's needs. At her workplace, Diah offers to Jarwo a matchstick for ten thousand rupiah per stick to look at her vagina. Then the transaction happened when Jarwo finally saw Diah's vagina with the matches he had bought. At the end of the story, Diah is seen washing her son alone. Poverty has forced Diah the “appearance” of her genitals to support her child. This scene of selling the
genital "appearance" is very intriguing because in this way Diah is not selling her vagina directly in an intimate relationship with a man who is not her husband, but she is simply selling the "appearance" only.

The process of this film began when Wregas was in the second grade of high school. The idea to make a story about ciblek has been around for more than five years with the script writing process. Until one day Wregas found an artistic kitchen at the house of a friend which inspired him to film a story about this special match-selling woman. During the shooting, Wregas added, there was no scene of showing female genitals in the script and there was also no shooting of genitals. However, in the editing process, Wregas had the idea that if the film was a form of voyeurism for the audience where they could peek at something without any sense of danger - an experience that they could not look outside of the film, so why not include pictures of female genitals in the film. Then it was decided that the scene was uncensored when Jarwo saw Diah's genitals with matches. However, the picture of the vagina belongs to a professional model who is paid a certain price with the credit name is not included in the film.

According to Wregas, Prenjak was created pro bono, meaning that all the actors and crews were not paid professionally, but only with nasi bungkus (lunch box) and bubur kacang ijo (mung bean porridge). In recent interview, Wregas admitted that distribution plays a significant role in production. In producing Prenjak in 2016, Wregas did not pay much attention to distribution when filming sensitive scenes, the genitals. From his experience in distributing Prenjak, Wregas learned that films must be watched by everyone. In Indonesian context, scenes of nudity or showing genitals are still considered taboo in contrast to European audiences who are used to it.


("Watching cinema is a collective experience. There are 200 people watching together in the cinema. This means they will share an intimate experience watching a scene of nudity with other people. This custom has long been formed in European countries such as France, Italy, and Germany. For viewers in foreign countries, nudity in films has become something that is normal. It is part of a work, a statement, or an argument. But in the experience of cinema that has grown up in Indonesia, we do not have regular experiences to see nudity in films. There are, but not many. The unfamiliarity of the experience will surely make the audience shocked.")

Wregas' awareness of the Indonesian audience prevented him from showing scenes of nudity in his new film, Tak Ada yang Gila di Kota Ini (No One is Crazy in this Town), which in the adapted short story (written by Eka Kurniawan) actually features scenes of nudity of crazy people. As already mentioned, awareness regarding this aspect of distribution arose when Prenjak could not be widely screened by Indonesian public due to showing the vagina and penis, even though the film had international achievements. As a result, the message the director wanted to convey through the film could not be fully conveyed by the Indonesian audience. In the interview, Wregas stated the following:


("In the end, Prenjak cannot be screened everywhere. There is a limited audience, which means that my message is also limited. When I made Prenjak, I didn't have a strong enough awareness that a film should be watched by everyone. At that time, the awareness tendency maybe only 50% and the rest was pure instinct as a filmmaker who likes exploration. Limitations in the distribution of films eventually became a serious consideration that came recently.")

The awareness of the importance of the distribution aspect in a popular culture circle made Wregas have to take a different approach for his next project. In the production process of Tak Ada yang Gila di Kota Ini, the director attempted to modify the original adapted story which featured scenes of nudity with other scenes that could still convey the same effect so that the message he wanted to convey still reached the audience. Wregas confirmed it
as follows, "Finally, in Tak Ada yang Gila di Kota Ini, I decided to modify the scenest to be something different, but they still have the same impact" (www.infoscreening.co, accessed on 13 September 2020).

What Wregas conveyed reflects a general pattern in the circuit of culture where there is always tension or a tug-of-war relationship between aspects of production, consumption, and regulation where distribution plays an important role in connecting the three. In the context of Indonesian audience, films have become a field of ideological contestation that lives in society. In Indonesia which has a majority religious population and has so-called eastern tradition that upholds politeness, nudity scenes must go through a formal regulatory process through Lembaga Sensor Film (the Film Censorship Board, a state formed board). In addition, it is inevitable that there are “non-formal regulations” coming from civil society, in the form of RT / RW decrees or statements released by civil society or certain organizations that need to prohibit a film from being shown. In its most extreme form, a certain group of people can prohibit certain films by holding demonstrations to pressure the organizers of film screenings or cinemas to cancel or stop the screening of certain films. The tensions in the distribution process ultimately lead to the film production aspect where the director can choose to continue his idealism at the risk of becoming controversial in society or choose to compromise with different strategies in conveying messages but at the risk of losing his ideal work. This reminds us of two categories of directors according to director Joko Anwar, namely “directors with statements” and “directors for hire” (Eric Sasono in Ekki Imanjaya & Hikmat Darmawan (Eds.), 2019: 1028). In directing Prenjak, it can be said that Wregas belonged to the first director category because everything was done pro bono without considering the distribution factor which includes the commercial element (for hire).

4. Conclusion

The result of this study indicates that the distribution of Turah and Prenjak has several similarities and differences. Thematically, both of them talk about the lives of the poor and poverty, though they have different angles. In terms of distribution, both utilize film festivals as the main distribution media, both at the national and international levels. Turah and Prenjak also won many achievements at various film festivals. The striking difference is in the choice of mainstream cinema distribution and road show film screening. While Turah benefited from commercial cinemas (including online platform) and road show, Prenjak did neither. This is mainly due to the presence of scenes in Prenjak showing vagina and penis. This makes the film unable to be widely screened. As a result, it was distributed only for festivals and limited screenings. Meanwhile, Turah which does not display scenes related to pornography has the flexibility in its distribution. This shows that as in the circuit of culture, film distribution is closely related to the process of production, consumption and at the same time regulation.

Acknowledgment

This article is the result of Riset Institusi (Risin) grant from Universitas Jenderal Soedirman (Unsoed). We would like to thank Lembaga Penelitian dan Pengabdian kepada Masyarakat (LPPM) Unsoed for this grant.

References


Pemandangan Umum Industri Film Indonesia [laporan BEKRAF dan filmindonesia.or.id] (2019).


Website
Retrieved September 13, 2020 from https://infoscreening.co/pemaknaan-kontrol-diri-seorang-wregas-bhanuteja/

Copyrights
Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.
This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).