

Showing the Unseen: A Meditation on Aesthetic Logic and Politics in Java

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ABSTRACT

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This paper explores the intersection of aesthetic logic, politics, and spiritual identity in Java, Indonesia, by juxtaposing ethnographic observations with formal and narrative analyses of the 1981 supernatural film *Ratu Ilmu Hitam* (The Queen of Black Magic). It examines the aesthetic strategies used by *dukuns* (shamans) like Mas Dadang and their cultural implications, contrasting the theatricality and constructedness of their techniques with the naturalist conventions of Hollywood cinema. The study argues that such practices reflect a unique aesthetic logic that bridges the seen and unseen, shaped by historical and socio-political contexts from the New Order regime to the present. Through an analysis of filmic conventions and ethnographic encounters, the paper highlights how localized forms of representation challenge global cinematic norms while serving as tools for negotiating religious identity, power, and social values. This approach underscores the ongoing relevance of Javanese aesthetics in mediating cultural and political dynamics, both in mass media and everyday practices.

INTRODUCTION

This paper analyzes aesthetic strategies and the politics they express, comparing ideas of naturalism versus obvious construction, theatricality, or fakeness in both film form and the practices of *dukuns*. It combines ethnographic observation and interviews with formal and narrative analysis of a popular film to reveal a complex approach to the politics of religious identity and power that connects the 1980s to present. In doing so, I argue for a more complex, convoluted view of state policies and best practices on religion and representation under the New Order regime (1966-1998). In a related way, I suggest that these ideas, negotiated between the developmentalist and authoritarian goals of the government and certain historically embedded beliefs and practices of the *rakyat* (people/society), have continued to be expressed, in modified yet recognizably similar forms, until the present. I argue that this points to a common aesthetic logic that continues to be reproduced across mass media like films and formal and informal discourses and practices in various private and public spheres. This is one reason, I contend, for the longstanding differences in approach and formal or stylistic conventions between mainstream, popular Indonesian films and those of Hollywood, Europe and many other areas outside of Southeast Asia. I begin with a detailed description of an ethnographic encounter which I will then put in conversation with the popular 1981 supernatural film *Ratu Ilmu Hitam* (*The Queen of Black Magic* dir. Imam Tantowi) and analyses of Indonesian films during the New Order.

DISCUSSION

In 2015 at a family gathering in Sidoarjo, I was introduced to a *dukun* (shaman) called *Mas Dadang*¹. *Mas Dadang* was in his late 30s at the time, and his spikey hair, slim-fitting jeans and Manchester United jersey were at odds with the robed, grey-bearded stereotype of *dukuns* often featured in films—a look also adopted by some actual *dukuns*. For those around him, however, *Dadang*'s appearance did not seem to read as inauthentic or to conflict with the nature of his practice.

I became interested in *Dadang* in part because of his philosophy of the world as “made up of the seen and the unseen” (*dunia terbuat dari yang ketok dan tak ketok*). I was especially intrigued by his interest in the causal force of the unseen—a conglomeration he describes alternately as God (*Allah/Tuhan/Sang Pencipta*) or the unconscious (*alam dibawah sadar*). Although it is invisible to most people, the unseen co-exists with and influences the visible world. Through

¹*Mas*, which means older brother, is a respectful, yet informal term of address for a male who is around the same age or a little older (younger men like teenagers are often also called *Mas* by parents and older friends). In a situation like this, however, if not instructed to use *Mas*, I would have referred to the *dukun* as *Pak Permadi* – *Pak* is roughly similar to Mister. After our meeting, *Mas Dadang* also agreed to let me use his actual name.

meditation and study, Dadang explained, he has learned to create an entrance into what lies beyond the seen, a process that he calls “tearing the veil” (*nyobek tabir*) of the visible. Our discussion took place in a small *pendopo* pavilion adjacent to his house where Dadang holds well-attended weekly sessions teaching his philosophy and techniques to children. We sat cross-legged on the floor with a group of his friends and relatives who had come to listen in. As he explained the concept of tearing open the visible, the others urged him to provide a demonstration of what he means. Still sitting beside me, *Mas* Dadang quickly raised his hands above his head, clapping and pressing them together, exclaiming “*wujud!*” – “materialize.” Following a series of jerky movements where his hands were brought down in front of his torso and clapped together again, Dadang slowly opened his right hand and extended it in my direction. In his palm was a small, translucent purple stone, which he indicated I should take.

What was clearest about the transaction is that Dadang had brought forth the stone from a place that was invisible to everyone present and had done so using a series of repetitive movements that gave the impression of being a formalized technique. Like most techniques, the eye-catching jerkiness of Dadang’s way of showing that he is moving something from the unseen to the visible appeared to carry its own implicit messages. Despite his unsterotypical clothes, for example, *Dadang’s* movements show that he does also present himself in ways that more closely resemble typical Javanese, Indonesian or Southeast Asian signifiers of spiritual power and magic. Rather than smoothly rendering his actions in the logical terms of the visual and the material – by taking the stone from his pocket, for instance – *Mas* Dadang seemed to be underscoring a *distinction* from the consistency and seamlessness of reality as we experience it under most circumstances.

For an observer attempting to determine whether practitioners like Dadang are capable of actual “magic,” his technique might seem too obvious or brash. It could certainly be read as a use of sleight of hand to trick or distract the eyes of viewers, creating the appearance of the stone’s manifestation as if from nothing. Even if one doesn’t think it’s a trick, one might wonder why the technique is used to make the stone appear, or if there is some additional purpose attached to it. At any rate, in the context in which it occurred, Dadang’s performative flourishes did not appear to undermine his onlookers’ acceptance that the stone originated from an unseen dimension. Looking at the event more broadly, whether the stone had in fact appeared through some kind of “magic” was probably among the least important aspects of what I had just seen. As Dadang’s movements already began to suggest, the stone’s power, as well as its market value, are entangled with a complex set of social and economic factors, many of which are in fact abstract and not directly visible.

Because the stone is a gem or *batu akik*, for example, many people would already see it as potentially holding special or supernatural properties. While not everyone necessarily believes this or understands it in exactly the same way, *batu akik* have long been sought after as charms that enhance the abilities or charisma of those who possess or wear them. At the time, *batu akik* were also part of an especially fervent nationwide trend. In addition to this, stones that have been “discovered” by someone like Dadang, and are thus imbued with the aura of the unseen, are particularly sought after, and can fetch prices upwards of tens, or even hundreds of millions of rupiah². Unlike some *dukun*, however, Dadang forbids the objects he acquires from the unseen to be sold or traded.

Perhaps for him, the unseen values and logic attached to the stones are at odds with the rules and market forces driving the visible world—his use of unnatural-looking formal techniques to bring forth the stone would seem to underscore this distinction. One way of looking at the function (or message behind) his technique, then, is that the arrival of an object from an unseen space should not invoke the “realistic” terms of the visible world. If the logic and physics of the unseen are in fact different, making the passage look normal might well raise suspicions as to the authenticity of both process and object: realism or naturalism in this case would paradoxically give the impression of fakery.

For those who do believe in, or at least accept, Dadang’s interpretation and formal dramatization of the intersection of two distinct spaces (the unseen and the visible world), his techniques have important consequences for how the visible, material world is understood as such: if something that looks false or alien actually signifies a kind of authenticity, then perhaps the visible world is more complex than it seems, and perhaps it cannot be understood to be whole or continuous as such. As Dadang’s techniques seem to imply, it contains normally unperceived ‘holes’ or gateways that lead to other dimensions—places with the potential to influence lived reality. If this is starting to sound like something from a movie, perhaps that is appropriate. Dadang’s manipulation of the visual logics of appearance and disappearance is not all that different from how filmmakers and other artists use formal techniques to show, hide, and suggest the existence of things we can’t see.

In the terms of film studies, we could say that Dadang is violating the rules of classical Hollywood continuity by making the space around him seem discontinuous and challenging to understand. The classical system of representation developed in the American film industry is

² The market for *batu akik* appears to be sustained mostly by the interest of locals. The stones are famously set in silver or gold rings worn by politically and spiritually powerful men and women. The recently increased fervor for *batu akik* in the last few years is responsible for what appears to be tens of thousands of stores, roadside stands, and often entire markets that have suddenly appeared – as if out of nowhere – in Java, Sumatra, Bali, and other islands. Although tourists also often buy jewelry in Indonesia, they are mostly steered toward large, air conditioned stores where the main selling point is intricately carved silver and gold rings, necklaces and bracelets, rather than the stones embedded in them.

premised on naturalism and works to create a world on screen that recognizably follows the visual, spatial and temporal logics of how we normally experience the world we live in. Specifically, this refers to a combination of shooting and editing techniques that David Bordwell calls an “invisible” system, “highly organized... to reinforce the causal, temporal, and spatial arrangement of events” (1985, p. 275) and to efface all signs that what appears on screen is fake or a construction. Time generally moves forward in a clear and consistent manner, and spaces appear continuous and whole. Even when ghosts, aliens, or beings from other dimensions enter the screen, they are generally rendered in the same classical visual logic, so that Hollywood’s audiences won’t be confused by them or perceive them as “fake.”

But at the same time, on-screen ghosts, like on-screen people in American classical cinema, are presented as absolutely separate from the space of spectators. As Mary Anne Doane writes, “the construction of a coherent and easily negotiable [filmic]...space... work[s] to annihilate the space and time of the spectator’s physical presence in the theater” (2014, p. 111). What occurs on screen, then, while *realistic*, is also ultimately relegated to the realm of fiction—a place which spectators have a privileged, but “safely” distanced view. Because of America’s particularly prominent role as an imperialist power throughout much of the twentieth century, and because of the related export of Hollywood aesthetics around the world, many politicized, oppositional film movements in South America, Africa, Europe (and also in the U.S.) purposely broke and challenged the rules of cinema as established by Hollywood. One of the things that interests me about film history in Indonesia and much of Southeast Asia, as Krishna Sen (2003) has also pointed out, is that the frequent lack of adherence to classical continuity is almost never framed as an “oppositional” strategy primarily aimed at attacking the influence of Hollywood. There have of course been left-wing movements in Indonesia, mainly from the late 1950s to the mid 1960s, that were premised on opposing mainstream American aesthetics.³ Unfortunately, however, most of the films produced by these movements were destroyed during the rise of the New Order in 1965-66.

To return to Dadang’s challenges to normative perception, I’m interested in how techniques in classic Indonesian films can be read in a way that relates to the performativity of Dadang or other *dukuns*: can films that mix distinct visual logics be seen not as making mistakes or as attacking the global hegemony of Hollywood per se, but potentially as working to authenticate the appearance of objects or agents from unseen spaces that intersect with the visible world? Furthermore, what kind of relationships between spectators and such “unrealistic”-yet-authentic agents and objects is posed by these conventions and approaches to representation? In my understanding, the absence of intent to oppose Hollywood also does not mean these films’

³ See Sen (1994, 2003, 2015), Barker (2019), van Heeren (2012), Masak (2016), Said (1992) and others.

techniques and strategies are not political. Embedded in dynamic local and regional aesthetic spheres, the techniques are used as tools to intervene in subnational, national, or regional political debates.

As I have shown elsewhere (2016, 2021), combinations of techniques and styles that purposely call attention to themselves but also culturally authenticate the status of films have been in wide use in Indonesia since at least the early 1950s. Not surprisingly, however, the group of local films most famous for stretching and distorting the visual logic of both Hollywood and the material world are those dealing with mysticism, constituting a popular genre produced continuously from the early 1970s. A particularly good example is 1979's *Ratu Ilmu Hitam* (*Queen of Black Magic*), directed by Lilik Sudjio and starring the actual "Queen of Indonesian Horror," the actress Suzzanna, as the film's central character and black magic practitioner. This film begins to give an idea of how things that are made unnatural in appearance and movement can signify something much more complex and interesting than mere fakeness or typical Third World oppositionality.

The film opens with a wedding. The daughter of the *lurah* (headman) in an East Javanese village is marrying a young man named Kohar from the same village. Things are complicated by the fact that Kohar has previously had a relationship with Suzzanna's character, Murni. Promising to marry her, he took her virginity, but then left her for the opportunity of marrying into the *lurah*'s family. Very quickly, things start to go wrong at the wedding, beginning when the bride is suddenly able to see things that no one else sees. They are also shown to viewers, however, rendered as a puppet-like skeleton and a few rather unconvincing monsters. The film inserts them, furthermore, in an obvious way using dissolve transitions that call attention to the editing. This is implicitly juxtaposed with what everyone on screen *can* see—a typically East Javanese performance of *Reog*, a traditional trance-dance enacted by a troupe hired to entertain the wedding guests. In the *Reog* performance, people who are wearing simple wooden masks are understood to actually become possessed by spirits. In this case, then, the obvious "fakeness" of the masks and the overt theatricality of the dancers' movements enhances the authenticity of the experience, using conventions, like those of *Mas Dadang* above, typically associated with the presence of the *unseen* and the spiritual. The appearance of the monsters in the view of the bride engages in a similar use of "fake" conventions that in fact signal something that is real—potentially in the actual domain of audiences as well as in the film's story-world. In similar ways, filmmaking across Southeast Asia is heavily influenced by other popular arts that have always rejected the importance of naturalism.⁴

⁴ See Ingawanij (2018), Pané (1953), Tan (1989, 1995) and others.

Soon after *Ratu Ilmu Hitam*'s first visual break with naturalism, the entire party goes into trance, losing control of their bodies. A *pawang hujan* (rain shaman) who has failed to stop impending rain is then lifted off the ground by unseen forces. Here the film creates a visual fuss around the trick, with another actor running underneath him several times as if to prove the levitation is real. Again it calls attention to the film's construction of the event, but in a way that does not necessarily undermine its actuality, or potential to really occur. This is played for comedic effect, introducing a different tone and genre into what is otherwise billed as horror. Especially in light of the numerous *piala citras* (national film awards) the film received for cinematography and editing, neither the deconstruction of the trick, nor the defusing of the scene's scariness with something absurd and funny seem to have taken away from the effectiveness of the scene.

After the wedding, Murni is accused by Kohar of causing the disturbance with black magic. Using his newfound influence as the village headman's son-in-law, he gathers a mob of villagers, and at his behest they drag Murni from her home and throw her off a cliff, claiming she is a witch. Unbeknownst to them, however, she is caught and saved from death by a *dukun*, who takes her under his wing. Despite her hesitation, he pushes her to take revenge on her attackers, pledging to teach her black magic with which to terrorize and strike back at them. Eventually she agrees and becomes his pupil, after which she starts using magic to wreak havoc on the village, especially targeting those who tried to kill her. One of the scenes of her attacks shows something very similar to what I witnessed with *Mas Dadang*: a "fake" formal/theatrical hand movement that is combined with revealing something realistic in the hand, in this case bees. The rest of the scene proceeds naturalistically, using real bees attaching themselves to the actor's face, and without quite so many camera or edit techniques that call attention to themselves.

In a later scene around halfway through the film we begin to see a local visual/aesthetic politics attached to such conventions emerge more clearly. What Katinka van Heeren (2012) identifies as a typical New Order (dictatorial period under president Suharto from 1966-1998) trope of a rationalist *kiai* (male Islamic leader) who comes in from outside to solve the spiritual problems of villagers is clearly invoked, but in a way that I argue also complicates the trope. As the scene of the *kiai*'s entrance intercuts his prayers with the attempts of Murni's teacher, the *dukun*, to attack him remotely using magic, the *kiai*'s slow, dispassionate and seemingly natural movements contrast with the exaggerated theatricality of the *dukun*. This sets up a politicized, and also aestheticized, contest between two opposing sides and styles of movement, with the *kiai* implied to represent the ostensibly rational, ordered stance of the modern state under Suharto. Van Heeren argues the presence and presentation of *kiai* in such films is in line with state and official religious precepts governing spirituality. The appearance of *kiai* promotes Abrahamic

religions (especially Islam) as a “solution” to widespread beliefs in ghosts and spirits that are often seen by the government as negative superstitions (2012, pp. 138-140).⁵

In this case, the *kiai*'s officially-sanctioned, naturalist approach is kept up until close to the end of the sequence. At that point, however, he begins to move and act in a way that is closer to the *dukun*'s techniques, which cause physical objects to fall on the *kiai* as the small mosque where he is praying begins to shake and collapse. His apparent mimicry of the *dukun*'s bodily formal-aesthetic tactics hence appears aimed at injecting his own prayers with a modicum of extra power. I argue that doing so complicates the sense of the figure of the film-*kiai* as a representative of logical/rational state and religious precepts. In this case and in other films, the role and attitude of the *kiai* is complex and reveals that he, too, can manipulate the unseen in similar ways to methods of the *dukun*.

In the final showdown of *Ratu Ilmu Hitam*, the *kiai* faces off with both Murni, and with her teacher the *dukun*. We see the social and political stakes of the previous scene's aesthetic split broadened and made clearer, yet also more complex. To support him in the fight, the *kiai*'s followers in the village pray in the subdued, naturalist manner that he did previously in the *musholla*, while he himself steps into the magic-filled fray of the battleground just outside, which is dominated by *ilmu hitam* and the skills and aesthetics associated with *dukun*. Accordingly, from the start he moves in a much flashier manner, flipping over and over like a gymnast, while miraculously keeping his *peci* (typical black/round Indonesian/Malay Muslim hat) from falling off his head. Despite this, he is still clearly positioned by the film as the calmer and more ‘rational’ combatant, while Murni's and the *Dukun*'s attacks showcase techniques that exceed filmic naturalism but are anchored in the real aesthetics of *dukuns*—and are shown to be very powerful, nearly killing the *kiai*.

This is where things a lot more muddled in terms of the role of the *kiai* as a singular restorer of Islamic/Abrahamic/State Order against the “backward,” “evil” and theatrical forces of magic. In order to win the battle, the *kiai*, whose name, Kliwon, is much more Javanese than typically Islamic (for example, Akbar), must form a dyad or couplet with Murni. Before discovering Murni was the village's pariah-queen of black magic, Kliwon had previously flirted with Murni, seemingly imagining her as a potential bride. But in a plot twist, they now realize they are in fact an estranged brother and sister, leading to Murni's intriguing statement about Kliwon: “*kau adalah kakakku, sekaligus kekasihku*” (you are my older brother, and also my lover”). The unusual relationship this sets up is of a piece with how their paths in life have diverged and then brought them together again, and with how the film mixes together different visual logics and politics. Kliwon left the village when they were still very young to study Islam in a *pesantren* in Banten, West Java, while Murni ended up being taken under the care and tutelage of a *dukun* back home in East Java. The *ilmu* (teaching/knowledge) that she receives from the *dukun*, moreover, is not

⁵ It should be noted that this is only one side of the New Order government's complex stance on religion and spirituality. In other instances, it much more openly promotes a syncretic approach mixing Abrahamic religions with historically embedded Hindu-Buddhist and animist practices that may include magic and *dukunery*.

one single philosophy or technique, but the result of his own study with “*berpuluh-puluh tukang teluh*,” (“dozens of black magic practitioners”) as he puts it. This simultaneously suggests the level of power wielded by the *dukun*, and the level of embeddedness of these kinds of cultural practices in Java and elsewhere in Indonesia during the New Order.

In the end, their very different skills and experiences create a powerful balance when they realize they are related, and Murni realizes she has been manipulated by Gendon, the *dukun* who instructed her in dark arts. As it turns out, he was using her to strike back at the village headman, who defeated him in a previous election for the post. Murni and Kliwon thus join forces, and in the spectacular battle that ensues, it becomes clear that without the combination of both of their respective techniques, styles and abilities, it would have been impossible to defeat Gendon. The form and visual logics of the film also reflect this conglomeration of otherwise supposedly distinct elements: it combines more realistic representations with obviously fake or overdramatized ones, while juxtaposing naturalistic shots and continuity edits with eyeline matches and performative zooms, off-kilter framings and wide-angle distortion. The latter elements call attention to the film as the result of formalized techniques that flaunt their own constructedness and fakery. The narrative shows the stakes of these spiritual and aesthetic splits not to be mere dramatization. The intersection of the seen and the unseen is deeply entangled with the real politics of the film’s world, ultimately in a conflict over the position of *lurah*, or village head.

A situation like this would of course not be unimaginable to most viewers in real life. Indonesian politics outside of the film are also frequently caught up in discourses and practices of spiritual power. President Soeharto himself, a proponent of *kejawen*, is known to have frequently consulted with *dukuns*. Perhaps the *lurah*’s statement that because he was legitimately chosen by the *rakyat* (people) and will never be defeated by a greedy, magic-wielding *penguasa* was a veiled critique of the state of politics under the New Order, which was known for rigging elections to keep Soeharto, and the regime around him, in power for thirty years. But what the film also makes clear is that without Kliwon and Murni’s concatenation of seen and unseen, Islam and *kejawen* (indicating syncretic mixtures of Abrahamic religions, especially Islam, and other, historically Javanese beliefs and practices), the people’s chosen leader would certainly have been defeated, and possibly killed.

The film’s own dynamic combination of the aesthetically natural and the formal, and of disparate genres, styles, and religious politics reflects on the frequent combination of distinct perspectives and forms of representation in real life under the New Order—something that argue is fundamental to Indonesian aesthetics, filmic and otherwise, and that continues into the present. *Mas Dadang*’s skills, for example, are not only known around Sidoarjo and East Java. Politicians have sought his assistance from as far away as Jakarta and island of Kalimantan. Even without that, his practice and the collection of skills, techniques, and *ilmu* that constitute it are also not easily separable from realities of daily life or politics. Like an artist, scholar, or filmmaker, *Mas Dadang*’s work as a teacher and *dukun* is also embedded in an ongoing process of shaping and re-shaping local perspectives on politics and power through forms of *representation*. He combines

Islam and other local belief systems in a way that is similar to the film's construction of a dyad from Murni and Kliwon. Comparing *Ratu Ilmu Hitam* to Dadang's philosophy, aesthetics and practice reveals a basic approach to life that is difficult to separate from the ways in which power and the spiritual politics of identity are projected on screens. In fact, beginning around 2015, a spate of popular horror films that return to the settings, topics, and visual techniques of the 1980s, building on, modifying, and re-applying these to the problems of the post-Soeharto, neoliberal present, much as Dadang himself does.

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