

Methodology

New Narratives, Emerging Genres: Dance Film Development in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Dance film has grown rapidly in Europe and America, while in Indonesia dance film has received little attention from both the general public and the "art world". The questions related to what a dance film is and how a dance film is characterised, still often become the main issues in every discussion forum and festival in Indonesia. This paper seeks to describe and provide insights into and an understanding of, the types of film or video work that can be categorised as dance film or dance documentation. Employing a descriptive qualitative study involving a literature search and interviews with respondents, as the data collection methods from year 2010 to 2017, this study is expected to provide an academic contribution to, as well as to support the development of, dance film. Specifically, it is hoped this research will: (1) enrich the scientific repertoire in the field of creation, (2) complement the genre development in the Indonesian film industry and (3) build people's appreciation in response to the existence of dance film, as a new means of narration and language of expression in the developing field of Indonesian film.

Keywords: *Dance film, dance documentation, Indonesian film*

INTRODUCTION

Dance film, also known as dance for the camera, dance video, dance in film, choreocinema, screendance, cinedance, video dance and dance movie, is a cinematic interpretation of dance work, which can be viewed through the medium of film or video. Dance film can also be defined as dance choreography, which is created solely for filming or video recording purposes and not for stage performance (Ardianto 2014). Thus, dance film is a distinct genre that does not solely belong to either the dance or film world. It is a hybrid work that cannot be enjoyed solely in terms of aesthetics or cinematography, from either the dance or film point of view, but only when both merge as a single unity. Douglas Rosenberg, in his paper *Essay on Screendance*, in the *Dance for the Camera* (2000a) symposium in Madison, Wisconsin, USA, preferred to use the term *screen dance* to describe the type of dance choreography construction, which only becomes "alive" when it is combined with a film or video medium or digital technology. The combination of dance and the different media eventually results in a collaboration culminating in the creation of dance film. In *Theory (into) Practice*, Rosenberg and Kappenberg (2014) also explained that dance film or screendance is an interdisciplinary product. Such a statement suggests that dance film is an eclectic art, which is no longer an extraordinary thing in this millennial age: a normative product and not an exception.

A similar point was also made by Evann Siebens, in *Choreography for Camera: a Historical Perspective*, who stated that the dance film concept is a creative collaborative form between director and choreographer. This form serves a common purpose by combining design elements, music, performance, aspects of technical cinematography and dance, in order to produce a final dance film work (Siebens 1998: 1).

According to Grauer (2002), dance film is a new medium which, even in America, only emerged in the 1960s–1970s. It is a new genre that does not solely belong to either dance art or film art. Dance film is not merely a documented form of dancing people: dance film exists to integrate film technology and dance, to be a distinct form of art work. One distinct similarity between dance and film is that both exist and develop within space and time. And when dance is applied in filmic ways, space and time become more flexible variables, rather than when dance is performed on a stage. In dance film, dance is presented as the main medium in delivering the plot or as the language of expression. It is the product of a symbiotic relationship between dance and film, which forms a hybrid art work as an effort to develop both dance and film arts now and in the future.

Considering the number of dance film productions in Indonesia, it can be seen that Indonesia is left far behind, when compared to other countries in producing dance film. In terms of quantity, Indonesia has a rich variety of dance arts in many forms of culture. According cultural statistics data, issued by Ministry of Education and Culture (2016), in Java alone, which consists of five provinces, there are 470 different kinds of performing arts, including dances. With a total number of 35 provinces, Indonesia has abundant resources in the form of a range of cultural heritages, including a wide variety of dances.

In year 2005, for the first time in Asia, the Dance on Screen Festival was held. This short-film competition event took place in Gedung Kesenian Jakarta from 10–12 March 2005. The *Dance on Screen Festival* presented the screening of dance films from Indonesia and various other countries. As a dance film festival and competition, the Dance on Screen Festival (2005) was the first and only big event for dance film in Indonesia, up to year 2017.

Dance film screening was also held in Indonesia in year 2012 as a part of the Indonesian Dance Festival event. In the *Dance and Film* segment of the festival, several dance films, both documentaries and stories, were screened including: *Pina* (German), *Rasinah* (Cirebon/Indonesian), *Bagong Kusudiharjo* (Yogyakarta/Indonesian), *Sang Penari*, *Exodus*, *Alisa*, *Drupadi*, *Dongeng dari Dirah* and *Opera Jawa*. On that occasion, Sardono W. Kusumo, the director and choreographer of the film *Dongeng dari Dirah* (1992), stated that it is unfortunate that the medium of film has not been commonly utilised by the dance artists; whereas the new phase of interdisciplinary collaboration between dance and film arts has the potential to produce a new form of creative work, for both dance and film artists. Kusumo also added that in Indonesia, dance exploration using film is at the experimental stage and has not been well established as an evident dance film genre (Indriasari 2012). The Indonesian Dance Festival 2016 once again held a dance film screening but only one dance documentary film was screened. *Retrospeksi Tokoh Pembaharu Tari Minangkabau*, Hoerijah Adam (1936–1971), collaborated with a *Playing Barabah* performance, which was reconstructed by the German choreographer, Katia Engel.

A year later, dance film screenings were again held in Indonesia, in the Bandung Dance Film Festival 2017. In this event, dance film screenings were not only held in screening rooms but also in many public spaces, such as at the city hall, city park, canteen of the Indonesian Art Institute in Bandung and at various banks. Alfianto Wajiwa, as the person in charge of the event, stated that the objective of *Seni Bandung: A Collaborative Art Event 2017*

was to promote dance film to be more widely known by society. This objective was achieved when the audiences from several screening areas expressed their positive appreciation.

Dance film screenings/festival events in Indonesia are still far behind when compared to other countries, especially those in America and Europe. The programme manager of *Dance and Film* in the IDF 2012 event, Adi Wicaksono, said that dance film was not widely known by Indonesian society. It was noted that the films in the *Film and Dance* segment were only attracting small audiences; even on the first day of screening, the dance film could only manage an audience of 30 viewers. (Indriasari 2012)

From the description, it can be seen that since the first Dance on Screen Festival in 2005, to the International Dance Film Screening 12 years later in 2017, the discussion on dance film has still been revolving around the definition and limitation of dance film itself; issues that members of the public have also been questioning. Such a debate shows that the dance film genre has not been well established in and is not well known by, Indonesian society.

In this article I first present the description of dance film development in general, then I review several definitions from the previous researchers and experts regarding dance film and draw a conclusion on the definition applied in this research, in order to categorise whether certain works are perceived as dance film or not. Then I will present a discussion analysing some Indonesian film works related to dance film genre. The data on dance film in this research was collected through library search mode and interviews with the respondents, which was then cross-referenced with the respective artists. Based on the findings of my research regarding dance film development in Indonesia, I argue that dance film development in Indonesia has reached a more conclusive stage as a distinctive emerging genre: a new form of eclectic work belonging to both dance and film genres.

DISCUSSION

Dance Documentation

Documentations of traditional dance made by foreign researchers are found in the form of online videos uploaded by institutions, groups or old documentary-focused film companies. Some examples of these footages are Balinese dance sequences, which are part of the documentary films *Bali, The Island Paradise* (1932), produced by Global Image Works and *Bali, Paradise Isle* (1946) from Travel Film Archive; two companies engaging in profile and documentary films. Other examples are *Ronggeng* dance and *Ibingan Pencak Silat* footage, produced by Akademi Seni Tari Indonesia (Indonesian Dance Art Academy) or Sekolah Tinggi Seni Indonesia (Indonesian School of Arts) Bandung and collected by Deutsches Tanzarchiv Cologne, Germany, accessed in year 2012.

In the Dance[E]motion: Dance on Screen Festival (2005), held by Tari Indonesia in Gedung Kesenian Jakarta, the semi-documentary dance film *Tamansari Mongso Rendheng* (2003), directed by Agus Yuniarso, received The Best Collaboration Award. The film *Tamansari Mongso Rendheng* combines Yogyakarta traditional dance with contemporary nuances represented in the dancers' costumes and make-up. In this work, the Tamansari Keraton Yogyakarta (royal garden of Yogyakarta palace) is explored in detail, especially in terms of architecture. It is a semi-documentary film, which is packaged in a combination of dance and historical building architecture. However, this work does not focus on the entertainment aspect but on its form as dance documentation experimentation.

These documentations cannot be categorised as dance film, because the film or video aspect was only used as a means of recording the dance and not as the medium representing the expression of dance movement that encourages feelings and emotions to be experienced by the audience. The film and video are merely the media to document the dance, without any intervention in the dance itself; while in dance film, the choreography is adjusted to meet the needs of the film maker.

Documentary Film about Dance

Besides dance documentation, there are also documentary films about dance in Indonesia. These documentaries were also produced by foreign directors and only the story material, dance and settings were taken from Indonesian culture. Examples are *Bali: The Mask of Rangda* (1974) directed by Elda Hartley, a production of Hartley Film Foundation-USA and *Bali Beyond The Postcard* (1991), a film directed by Peggy Stern, production of Filmmakers Library, Coe Film Associates, PennState, University of Minnesota, USA. The film *Bali Beyond The Postcard* tells about the life of a *gamelan* maker's family and Balinese *Legong* dancer over four generations. This film won the Gold Award in Dance on Camera Festival (1992), Gold Apple in National Educational Film and Video Festival (1992) and an Honourable Mention in the 1992 American Film and Video Festival (Spain 1998: 22).

Dance Film and Video Dance

In year 1992, choreographer Sardono W. Kusumo with Robert Chappell, an American director and cinematographer, created a dance film entitled *Dongeng dari Dirah (The Sorceress of Dirah)*. This film is derived from Balinese mythology about the existence of *Janda Dirah*, a widow named Dirah and *Dewi Sri (Mbok Sri)*, a mythology that developed among farming communities in Central Java.

Dongeng dari Dirah (1992) took the spirit and tradition of Balinese and Javanese dance and packaged them into a contemporary presentation. This adaptation film is divided into four sequences. The first sequence opens with the depiction of fertility and togetherness in the life of Balinese society, represented by the appearance of Dewi Sri as the fertility goddess, the practice of religious ritual and the local traditional art performances. The second sequence displays the staged performance of the legend of *Janda Dirah*. The third sequence tells about the marriage arrangement that Dirah made for her daughter. And the last scene tells of Dirah's daughter running away from the marriage arrangement and how she found her true love in Suku temple, Karanganyar, Central Java. In this temple, Dirah's daughter is surrounded by mystical symbols representing many aspects of sexuality. Dirah was enraged and she transformed into Rangda, Queen of *Leak* (evil spirit in Balinese mythology). But eventually, Rangda could be and was, defeated by the local villagers. A footage capture of *Dongeng dari Dirah* is presented in Photo 1.



Photo 1 Rangda in *Dongeng dari Dirah* (1992)

Kusumo explained that the story or narration was only a stimulus to creating the film. Kusumo and Chappell tried to create a new approach to communicate with the viewers through body language, by using film media. Thus, the visual elements of this film are more dominant than other elements, even more than the plot itself (Kusumo, *pers. comm.*, 11 February 2012).

Kusumo used a narrator (voice over) in English: he intentionally did not put the dialogue in subtitles so that the viewers would focus solely on the film's visual presentation. He believes that visual language would give the element of surprise, hypnosis and even hallucination which would last longer than the verbal language. Kusumo further assumed that a good film only needed one single scene which would leave a deep and lasting impression in the memory of its viewers for the rest of their lives.

In *Dongeng dari Dirah*, Robert Chappell's camera successfully captured the aesthetic moments of the gestures, expressions and drama presented by the dancers. Thus, the emotion within the picture can be delivered to and felt by, the viewers. This experience is in line with Hanan (2017: 176) who stated that "there is collectivity in the shared experience of potentially universal, deep forms of feeling, toward which the film wishes to move". Such emotions are dramatised both by the eroticism and by the human chain presented in the *Kecak Dance*, choreographed for the purpose of filming: a well crafted collaboration, which becomes the basis of dance film creation.

After the release of *Dongeng dari Dirah* (1992), there were no more dance films produced by Indonesian dance or film artists until the early 2000s. Along with the development of digital video technology, which leads to a cheaper more practical means of film making and also with the influence of the Western film art and dance movements, several young Indonesian film artists and choreographers started to explore video as a part of dance: not only as a medium of documentation but also as medium of expression. Some of these young artists are choreographers Jecko K. Siompo and Chendra Effendy Panatan and film directors Agus Yuniarso and Faozan Rizal.

In the early 2000s, the choreographers and directors had tried to create short duration dance films. Some of their films had even been presented in foreign film festivals; for example the film *Exodus* (2003), by Chendra Panatan and Sherman Ong, was screened in the International Rotterdam Film Festival (2004), Bangkok International Film Festival (2004), Barcelona Film Festival (2004) and Los Angeles Film Festival (2004). *Exodus* is a dance film, which portrays a same-sex love story within the setting of urban life in Jakarta. The plot begins with a scene where an ethnic Chinese girl from a lower social class meets a Javanese royal dancer: a spark of affection leads to compassion, passion and obsession between them (<http://www.indieflix.com/Films/Exodus>).

Exodus is dominated by an intense Javanese cultural background. The story in this film is informed by the aspirations and identification of the two women risking their lives for a better existence in the post-Soeharto era. *Exodus* tries to explore undecorated realistic spaces; it even leaves the impression that everything is preserved the way it is. This frankness is probably intended as a way to help dance movement language, which is usually set in such an abstract way, to be more realistic and easier to approach and understood for its audiences.

In year 2004, Katia Engel and film director Faozan Rizal produced a dance film entitled *Of Lilies, How They Grow*. This work was done by using a static camera pattern, in which the camera only captures the moments presented by the dancer. Further, Rizal explained that the basic concept was to liberate (the film's object) in the same way nature liberated people to live. This means that Engel collaborated with nature and Rizal recorded the nature. This film tells its viewers the story of a growing lily.

Dance film is a distinct form of art. As described by Rizal (in Michalik 2008: 75), dance film is a film art in which the dance is the starting point. According to them, there is something distinctively cinematic about performances, which makes it difficult to imagine the performance apart from the manner in which it is captured in the film. His film *Of Lilies, How They Grow* can be categorised as dance film.

A filmic approach is assumed to be achieved when a film maker is able to capture different dimensions or points of view presented by the dancers, when those dancers are interacting with their stage. The reflected visualisation of Katia Engel, in *Of Lilies, How They Grow*, who was dancing on the water, is an example of this dimension. This footage of the dancer's reflection on the water is what Rizal thinks of as the description of the basic principle of his dance film (ibid).

Many dance films and short dance videos were also produced by choreographer Jecko Siompo. Some of his video works tend to focus on playful elements in its choreography and promote urban issues. Some of his works include *Cabdance* (2009) and the *Popping-Animal Pop* series (2011) (*Koran Tempo*, 16 March 2005). His ability in combining Indonesian traditional dance, especially traditional dance from Papua, with *streetdance*, created semi-robotic popping movements, which look attractive when shot on camera and then visualised through a video or television screen. Moreover, with backgrounds such as multi-storey buildings, walls filled with murals, narrow alleys and tunnels in Jakarta or old warehouses with steel construction, the movie depicts a young generation growing up in an urban environment and culture. The robotic popping movements, without expression, also represent the life of the people in a big city, which looks similar to a machine: monotonous, without expression and constantly moving. It is similar to the way Jeffrey Vance (2003) depicted Charlie Chaplin in the film *Modern Times* (1936), a character who is struggling in alienation and trying to hold on to his humane soul in a world of mechanisation and mindless assembly-line production.

When the Blackberry mobile phone was booming in Indonesia in year 2009, choreographer Yola Yulfianti used one to record her dance video. By attaching the phone to the dancer, the phone recorded the dancer's every movement. She wanted there to be no distance between the dancer and the camera: what the dancer saw, the camera did too. The subjective camera concept was able to produce a more personal feeling to the presented scene. In her latest film, Dwi Windarti has produced a dance film entitled *Mendut, The Untold Story* (2017), a black and white dance film in digital video format. *Mendut, The Untold Story* tells about the fragile side of *Roro Mendut*, a woman living in the Mataram Kingdom era, who charmed many men with her beauty and her cigarette product, but who was also famous for being courageous in struggling against the domination of the reigning power.

Dance in Film

Besides Sardono W. Kusumo and the young artists mentioned above, the name Garin Nugroho cannot be disregarded when considering Indonesian dance film development. Through his musical films, such as *Opera Jawa* (2006) and *Generasi Biru* (2008), Nugroho explored dance in an opera format presented through the film medium. *Opera Jawa* was inspired by the *Sinta Obong* episode of the Ramayana story, which was then adapted by Nugroho to fit into the reality of modern Indonesian society. In *Opera Jawa*, Nugroho combines realistic and symbolic styles. The plot in the film begins with daily life events, which then shift into dance choreography, followed by the establishing of visual arts elements, symbolically representing the events being narrated, in order to amplify them to be more dramatic and meaningful. Nugroho provided freedom of expression for the actors and artists involved in the film, according to their preference for their language of expression. In this aspect, Nugroho positioned himself as a gallery, providing spaces for the choreographers, dancers and visual artists to perform.

The camera concept proposed by Nugroho, in the *Opera Jawa* film, is stage or objective camera; thus the characteristic of the camera is shooting the events happening in front of it. The camera shoots as if it is recording a theatre performance on stage. As a stage, it creates distance between the viewers and the events happening. The viewers are only witnesses so that they are not drawn into the events happening before them (Novianto 2008: 200). This style of camera is also frequently used by Akira Kurosawa in his films, such as *Rashomon* (1950) and *Ran* (1985).

Inspired by Slank's songs for 25 years (1983–2008), in year 2009, Nugroho produced a musical film, *Generasi Biru*. Collaborating with two young directors, John De Rantau and Dosy Omar, Nugroho proposed Slank to be the centre of the film. According to Nugroho, reading Slank and Slankers (Slank's fanatical fans) is like reading Indonesia. A footage capture of *Generasi Biru* is presented in Photo 2.



Photo 2 Footage from musical film *Generasi Biru* (2009).

Generasi Biru tells about Slank's meeting with some figures who had trauma with violence, politics, drugs and love. In the film, Bimbim, the drummer, meets a child who always hides under the table since he saw his parents abducted when he was playing under the table. The vocalist Kaka meets Nadine, a young girl who turns out to be a prostitute. Ivan, the first guitarist and Ridho, the bassist, meet with a figure who behaves like a wild animal since he had been beaten like an animal while Abdi, the second guitarist, meets with a mother

whose children were abducted during the reformation era in year 1997. Slank tries to fight the various forms of violence and sabotage that are causing trauma. By the end of the film, the group succeed in getting away together to Pulau Biru, a peaceful island without violence and threat.

In the *Generasi Biru* film, besides music and dance, the three directors also combined documentary, drama and animation formats. Through their totality in their experiments, they expected to produce an innovation, where there is no tedium in an Indonesian film.

Similar to the *Opera Jawa* film, in the *Generasi Biru* collaboration, Nugroho once again presented verbal language in the form of dance and music. The only difference is that in *Opera Jawa*, the songs are traditional songs in the Javanese language, while in *Generasi Biru*, the songs and music are Slank's *rock n blues*, combined with modern choreography. Dance choreography in the *Generasi Biru* film (2009) was entrusted to Eko Supriyanto and Jecko Siompo. Both of them have their own different styles: Eko, with his intense traditional Javanese dance background combined with modern dance and Siompo, with his Papuan traditional dance combined with street dance movements. Their collaboration created rich and colourful choreographic forms. The cinematic approaches used in *Opera Jawa* and *Generasi Biru* are also different: in *Generasi Biru*, the camera moves more flexibly and with mobility for a more attractive picture that is funky and humorous, with some animated additions in it.

CONCLUSIONS

After reviewing film creations by Sardono W. Kusumo, Garin Nugroho, Chendra E. Panatan and the other young artists cited in this paper, the problematic issue of whether the films above are classified as dance film, dance documentation or dance documentary, has become clearer. In general, the taxonomy of dance film is mainly characterised by a strong combination, with both dance and film genres integrating into an eclectic new genre, which can no longer only be assessed from a single point of view. With this limitation, dance documentation cannot be categorised as dance film, because its only purpose is to document dancing activity, which means that the images presented in video or film media do not correlate with the dance's choreography and expression. On the other hand, documentary film about dance can be categorised as a dance film because there is an element of the cinematic approach applied in the production process. The dance in the dance documentary needs to adjust to the cinematic

requirements so that it can be the narrative medium. Many choreographers have collaborated with visual artists and cinematographers in later works and use dance as the main element in their creations. Thus, the development of the dance film genre in Indonesia has reached a more definite stage. Dance film production, it can be argued, is also a means to enrich the scientific repertoire relating to the field of creations, and to complement the genre's development as part of the Indonesian film industry. Equally, dance film can help to develop people's appreciation in response to the emergence of this new means of narration or language of expression in Indonesian film.

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