

Chiaroscuro in *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban* Film by Hanung Bramantyo

Dyah Gayatri Puspitasari¹ Sri Rachmayanti²

1. School of Design, Bina Nusantara University, KH. Syahdan no.9, Jakarta 11480, Indonesia
2. School of Design, Bina Nusantara University, KH. Syahdan no.9, Jakarta 11480, Indonesia

E-mail of the corresponding author: srachmayanti@binus.edu

Abstract

Chiaroscuro in film is a low-key artistic lighting that produced a boundary between dark and light area. It is also able to evoke the dramatic impression and the specific emotional depth. Based on its language etymology, the term *chiaroscuro* is an Italian and clearly not originated from Indonesia. Film, as a modern art genre, is also an imported product. However, this does not mean that lighting in film does not include Indonesian heritage essentially. This heritage can actually be an asset to develop modern technique of artificial lighting. Through the perspective of Indonesian society, lighting does not only about dark and light, but also about its philosophy. This paper emphasized the Javanese philosophical interpretation of lighting through *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban* film that were produced by Hanung Bramantyo as its study case. By applying cultural studies and interdisciplinary approach, this research found some interesting outcomes. Firstly, the *chiaroscuro* lighting of those films had a significant relation with cultural and traditional values of Javanese culture. Secondly, in their technical phases, the integrity of “modern lighting” such as electric media with “traditional lighting” such as torch, oil lamp, etc produced a hybridity of double light. Transcending its technique, this double light was identical with double sign and dual culture. Lastly, through philosophical perspective, this lighting technique enclosed particular life value. In Javanese society, lighting is not only about dark and light, or the ability to see things physically, but it is more about peacefulness, determination, brotherhood, etc. Therefore, from these findings, it can be stated that this research placed the “local lighting” in equal position or even position transcended the “modern lighting.” Moreover, based on the findings of this research, lighting can be seen not only from visual aspect, but also from the aspects of storytelling, realism, and pictorial composition. Through these three aspects, film will be able to construct its aesthetical interpretation and philosophical aspect in depth

Keywords: *chiaroscuro*, film, Javanese culture

DOI: 10.7176/ADS/108-04

Publication date: November 30th 2023

1. Introduction

Film is an art genre that has its own complexity. Compare with other art genres such as fine art, music, performing art, and literature, film can be stated as the most complicated work. All of those art genres can be presented in film at the same time. As what Ranciere has implied, this situation is called auto-lucid-process, which means an endless negotiation, a dialectical negotiation with ‘playful’ characteristic in the art fields (2006: 8). Thus, film has an open space to convey countless problems in life. As an artwork, film does not only act as entertaining media, but also as interpreting media. The genres of art entirely are actually having this role, although film has bigger and comprehensive open space. Film also represents the development of science and technology. In this context, film is suitable with the history of its emergence as the latest and most modern work of art.

As that kind of modern artwork – from technological equipment – especially in Indonesia, film is clearly an imported art genre. Camera as the main equipment for producing film used to be unfamiliar equipment in Indonesia. Another art genre has produced artworks that are based on tradition and culture such as traditional music, traditional dance, traditional theatre, and oral literature. There is no product of traditional film so far, which emphasize the fact that film is a product of modern society. It may be the reason why the development of film (both quality and quantity) in Indonesia is later than other countries, especially in western area.

The boldness of filmmakers to develop political and religious themes was based on their creation skills,

especially in visualization. With their limitation in technology and finance – compare with Hollywood’s films – those young filmmakers have courage to explore more aesthetically not only in art and movement but also from the film’s subjects and objects themselves. Hence, this manner has become their endeavor to construct thematically and technical aspects of film.

As what we have discussed previously, film as imported product produces visualization that does not always rely on technology. It can be explored from other technique such as *chiaroscuro* lighting. In film, *chiaroscuro* is a lighting technique that is produced based on *low-key lighting* – high contrast of light and dark (Pratista, 2008: 79). In this case, *chiaroscuro* is not only based on modern technological aspects, but also considered as a mixture of local culture and traditional aspects. Thus, the mixture of these two aspects can produce new artwork that holds cultural and philosophical values, which is possible since a mixture between form and substance is a common viewpoint in cultural product.

If modernism expresses design as *form follows function*, in local perspective, form is not only a manifestation of function but also value. Through this research, *chiaroscuro* in modern perspective is a matter of light and dark, which then defines contextually as a lighting substance. In other words, lighting does not always refer to a matter of light and dark, but more to the complexity of value behind it. In Javanese culture, lighting relates to supernatural and mystical value. Lighting is an entity of life, which forms harmony of individual identity in universe. The local culture facts of light are interesting to be explored in Indonesian films. How far these facts can be captured and represented by filmmakers through their works. The realization of facts is possible since film itself is and art genre that gives space and possibility for this matter. Even though it must be supported by further research.

Researchers did further study about these facts and chose *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban* film by Hanung Bramantyo as their research focus. This film was chosen based on the reputation of Hanung Bramantyo as the most brilliant and controversial filmmaker in Indonesia. His works always gain big response from public, both pro and contra, even become polemic. *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban* film is also one of the controversial films that even caused *Komisi Fatwa Majelis Ulama Indonesia* (Indonesian Panel of Islamic Scholars) protested and forbid this film to be distributed since they felt that this film discredited Islam, especially in madrasas.

Perempuan Berkalung Sorban film focused on the dynamics of life in Islamic madrasas near East Java area. The main location of story gave opportunities to explore local insights of Javanese culture. Besides the great story, this film was also emphasized on the artistic lighting of *chiaroscuro*. This film can be a good sample of Hanung Bramantyo’s technical effort to present specific values in Javanese culture. Based on this notion, this research will focus on two main issues: (1) how the *chiaroscuro* lighting in *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban* film relates with Javanese cultural aspects, and (2) how the message and value behind the film can be understood through *chiaroscuro* lighting.

2. Materials and Methods

Researchers chose to apply cultural studies and interdisciplinary method in order to put culture as the form of behaviour, character, notion and public outcomes from the aspect of dynamic, contemporary and complexity. Thus, from this notion, culture cannot be understood from monodisciplinary perspective only. Culture is not considered as a static sign system, but more as dynamic, progressive, and even subversive. It is a production process and sign exchange (Barker, 2003: 10). The stressed relation in culture supporting the idea that interdisciplinary is needed eclectically. At this point, there is nothing that can be considered as superior theory and definition, only an elevated narrative that dominates understanding (Kellner, 2010: 34).

In this context, film is an artefact or cultural product that has complexity. It is not only considered as modern artwork based on technology that is closed from external aspects such as tradition and local culture, both technically and thematically. The aesthetic of film does not stop as a static system, but it keeps moving and changes continuously. In this case, *chiaroscuro* lighting has open characteristic. Lighting is not only focusing on camera’s technology, but presenting as a part of “subject matter” that was produced in film.

Thus, this paper is an endeavor to interpret *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban* film and it will be done through two phases. Firstly, the identification phase of film structure that intends to create objective appraisal. This phase is in accordance with the main purpose of research i.e. to know and understand the artistic value of film and the relation between each element that construct structure, especially in its thematic aspect. The structural method that based on literature becomes the main instrument during this phase. Secondly, since text is the network of sign, there will be a process for dismantling of sign during this phase. This phase will refer to Charles S. Peirce’s

theory of semiotics, which focus on the meaning of sign as icon, index and symbol. Through this method, researchers can illustrate the relation between the features of film, the mixture between its sign elements (object, context, and text), its concept and interpretation that has been produced, its information that has been delivered, and how the meaning and information of this film can be associated with cultural relation in society.

3. Discussion

The Synopsis of *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban* Film

Perempuan Berkalung Sorban film (2009) is an Islamic romantic drama that based on Abidah El Khalieqy's novel with the same title (2001). She is female writer from Jombang, East Java. This story focuses on the life of Anissa, a female protagonist who has strong character, brave, and smart. She lived and grew up in the conservative Islamic environment, in the family of *Kyai* (Islamic priest) that run small madrasa *Salafiah putri Al-Huda* in East Java, Indonesia. In this conservative environment, the only faithful teaching are *al-Qur'an*, *Hadits* and *Sunah*. The other books and teachings are considered unfaithful and misguided. Living in this madrasa, Anissa was taught to follow man and was not allowed to have high education. She refused to follow the rules, although at some point, she gave up and followed his father command to marry Samsuddin, a violent man who chose polygamy. Anissa did not love him and decided to get divorced. Afterwards, she met with Khudori, her childhood friend and her first love. Finally, she then got married with him. This film also focuses on the life struggle of Anissa and Khudori to enlighten and defend women's right in Islamic conservative environment.

3.1 The Perspective of Local *Chiaroscuro*

From textual fact that has been discussed, researchers find the correlation between the story of Anissa love struggle and the interpretation of *chiaroscuro* light setting in the film. In this film, lighting is more thematic, not only technical of light and dark. It can be stated that *chiaroscuro* in this film has been studded in the perspective of local *chiaroscuro*. As what has been mentioned previously, in Javanese culture, lighting is a philosophical entity. Life is light, and God is considered as the Enlightenment (Najib, 1991: 6). Through this perspective, human who has light in his physical body is considered as the light carrier and spiritual enlightenment, a divine messenger of God. Based on the myth, the lineage of Javanese famous kings was originated from light. *Ken Arok*, the ancestor of Javanese kings, was gained his fame and glory because he married *Ken Dedes*, a woman who has light in her groin area (Mangkudimedja, 1979). Moreover, in Javanese society, *kepaten obor* (black out of light from torch) is forbidden since they believe that this incident can be a sign of danger in family.

In the relation with *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban* film, the philosophical perspective of light also exists in some scenes. Anissa's fight to defense female Muslims from the conservative teachings in *Salafiah putri Al-Huda* madrasa was a strong signifier, which showed her message to bring woman out of the darkness. At this point, it can be said that Anissa had tried to present new rationality, new pathway to brightness and left the darkness of old rationality, a conservative that would bring female Muslims into self-destruction and unhappiness.

Based on the Javanese cultural perspective, this matter can be interpreted as the philosophy of *urip iku urup*. This philosophy has two interpretations. Firstly, *urip iku* (life is) *urup* (giving), which means, the worthiness of human life is on his or her way of giving, not asking. Secondly, *urip iku* (life is) *urup* (burning light), which also means, the worthiness of human life is on his or her ability to light up or illuminate other people in society (Musman, 2015: 36). These interpretations led us to focus on the philosophical meaning i.e., "Life is light. And as the ones who have light, thus our life supposes to be useful for people around us." This interpretation then also led us to another philosophy *eling miring sesami* and *waspada ing lair lan batine*. *Eling miring sesami* is a caring behavior in human's life, and as a consciousness that we are social creatures that will not be able to live alone (Bayuadhy, 2015: 18-19). Whereas *waspada ing lair lan batine* is a human's awareness, both physically and spiritually (Musman, 2015: 68). Through the philosophical awareness, human can have deeper thought and be more ready of any condition or danger outside or inside his or her life. Self-awareness in spiritual has strong connection with intellectual understanding, which will become the fundamental of life and the development of intellectual thinking, courageousness, and awareness.

According to visual fact of the film, the perspective was also appeared through the light setting in some scenes. There were some levels of lighting that had been presented in *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban* film such as bright, dim, darker, and darkest. From the technical side, these lights were produced by integrating "modern light" of electric media with "traditional light" such as fire torch, *sentir*, *cempor* light, lantern, and so on. This integration caused a hybrid of double light, which identical with double sign and dual culture entities in philosophical aspect. Thus, these kinds of light setting hold specific values in life.

There were some scenes that would be discussed as the local signifier in *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban* film. The scene that was shown in figure was illustrated the visualization of *Salafiah putri Al-Huda* madrasa's entrance gate at nighttime. Relating with *chiaroscuro* light setting, the scene showed two sources of lighting i.e., lighting that came from inside the text (internal source) and lighting came from outside the text (external source). A lantern was a source supporting light that came from inside the text. It was obviously an object of film's properties. The lantern's position would somehow be related with the message and thematic aspect of film. However, light that was produced by the lantern would give influence to light setting in the scene. Whereas the external source of light clearly came from Hanung's light setting that was also supported by the effect of camera's lighting. Therefore, it can be said that this scene provides the hybrid of double light. Technically, this kind of light was produced by integrated "modern light" of electric media and combined it with "traditional light" of hanging lantern.

The most interesting part of this scene is the fact that the hanging lantern was positioned in the entrance gate. From further observation, we can see that the light that illuminated the entrance was not coming from the lantern but from other source (spot light from above) since it was impossible for the lantern to produce that quality of light. This fact justified the message that in this case, lighting is a subject matter, not only a technical matter only. In this scene, the light setting holds a socio-cultural character. Through Peirce's semiotics, light that come from the lantern looks like a point that was framed with darkness is an index that representing Anissa's struggle to fight the darkness in conservative and traditional perspective of *Salafiah putri Al-Huda* madrasa. The sturdiness of entrance gate with dimmed light is an index of power that brought society into underdeveloped situation.

In Javanese philosophy, lantern is a symbol of guidance in human life. Whist, darkness is an index of oppression and calamity. Thus, in this case, light becomes a background of female Moslem's rights in misguided Islamic teaching. This interpretation is also emphasized by the condition of entrance gate that is not opened entirely, which acts as signifier of the darkness in *Salafiah putri Al-Huda* madrasa's traditional perspective. It shows the closed mind and consciousness of the madrasa against the genuine values of Islamic teaching.

The next scene, figure 1, illustrates the moment when Anissa met her father in her dream. Although in the story Anissa had grown up, but in her dream, she was back into a young girl again. They met and hugged, forgiving each other and ending their conflict. In the dream, her father implied his blessing and approval for Anissa's struggle.

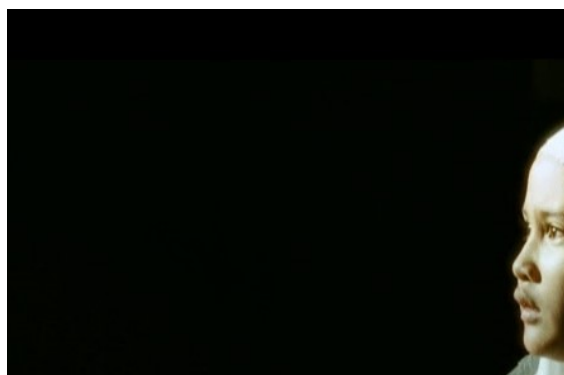


Figure 1. Lighting in Anissa's figure

Resource: Scene at *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban* Film (2016)

Regarding the *chiaroscuro* lighting, the scene shows external lighting explicitly (from camera and other sources), which illuminates Anissa's figure that was covered in white veil. Lighting comes and sublimates into subject matter (Anissa): she becomes the source of light. Dark background emphasized the contrast of light. In this case, light holds cultural and philosophical meaning. Anissa is interpreted as the enlightenment that mark the changes of life structure in society. The light that comes from Anissa's body emphasizes the Javanese philosophical culture, especially the belief that blessing of parents is sacred and will illuminate their children. Also, from Javanese people, the world of dream will always be a significant aspect of life. In Peirce's perspective, Anissa's illuminated body is a conceptual body that was produced by the filmmaker. A body becomes a sign.

This creation of sign is a Javanese local-epistemology. In some religions other than Islam, such as Christian and Hinduism, light is also identical and related with spiritual belief. Although, the light only to emphasize the existence of God or other sacred objects. In Islamic belief, the only human whose existence was being replaced

by light is only the Holy Prophet of Muhammad and there is almost no ordinary human allowed to be illustrated with light besides him. This case is not happened in Javanese culture, light can present anyone who is considered as “special”. The word that means light, such as *tedjo*, can be used specifically as human’s name (as example: *Sujiwo Tedjo* that means good soul or illuminated soul). On the other hand, the figure of child is interpreted as the purity of human, as the light that needs to be protected by parents’ blessing.

By observing that kind of visual scene, we can see that *chiaroscuro* in this scene is identical with double sign that also aims into dual culture i.e., both Islamic and Javanese culture. More that its technicality, lighting in Anissa’s figure shows the philosophical structure of spiritual values such as purity, courage, determination and peacefulness.

Moreover, the lighting observation of Anissa’s figure becomes attractiveness of this film itself. Another example can be seen in figure 3, which presents a scene of Anissa in her room. In this scene, the only source of light comes from sunlight outside the opened window. This is quite interesting because normally when the light comes from sunlight outside window, the entire room will be bright. Instead, the light only illuminates Anissa’s and her baby’s figures. This style of *chiaroscuro* emphasizes the main character’s emotion. The time when Anissa and her baby had a certain feeling that something had happened to Khudori, her husband and the father of her baby. Khudori involved in accident and passed away. Somehow Anissa’s baby felt this unfortunate event and kept crying. Therefore, it is quite clear that internal lighting (lighting from outside the room) that was combined with external lighting (lighting from camera and other sources) has emphasized the emotional effect of this scene. This also relates intensely with the thematic aspect of spiritual connection between family members in Javanese society.



Figure 2. Lighting in Anissa’s figure

Resource: Scene at *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban* Film (2016)

Besides the lighting aspect, the dark aspect in *chiaroscuro* also holds a significant role. As what John Alton had stated, darkness always has its own mystery (Alton, 2013: 44). The utilization of dark aspect can be seen quite a lot in *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban* film. One of them can be seen in the scene was presented a moment when Anissa and Khudori had been trying to reform their relationship. From this scene, we can see Anissa’s figure in silhouette movement. The communication was delivered without any verbal conversation or dialog. The story was conveyed through emotional forms such as shadow movement and music background. This visualization approach is almost similar with *solah* concept in *sabet* aesthetic of Javanese *wayang* (shadow puppet). As Soetarno said, *Sabet* is a *wayang*’s movement that presenting specific scene and character. *Solah* is a movement of *wayang*’s character that presenting situation and specific action (2007: 129-132).

4. Conclusions

Based on the analysis before, we can understand more that *chiaroscuro* in *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban* film is one of Hanung Bramantyo’s efforts to present the possibilities of forming cultural view and word articulation of light-dark, which were motivated by Javanese philosophy and culture. This local *chiaroscuro* has a power to present remarkable reality that can focus viewers’ attention entirely, even for the insignificant matter, “the splendor of the insignificant”, as what Sugiharto had stated in his work (2013). Through the creative intervention, Hanung Bramantyo can represent and transform light setting of film into his aesthetic language, as the form language that can develop imagination, attention, emotion and perception of specific values in film.

Moreover, the integration of double light hybrid that identical with double sign and dual culture in this film is more than its technical aspect, it touches the aspect of philosophical structure of purity, courage, determination, and peacefulness. In this framework, *chiaroscuro* can be interpreted as cinematic metaphor that is not only focus on artistic value of film, but also support the depth of Javanese cultural time and space. In Javanese perspective, light is not only about light and dark in physical aspect, but also as a whole entity that touches sociocultural-philosophical aspect. At this point, we can say that in Javanese culture, light is a culture itself.

Therefore, it can be concluded that *chiaroscuro* in *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban* film holds a significant role from many aspects such as realism, pictorial composition, and also storytelling aspect that have important message and value of life. Hanung Bramantyo, the filmmaker who also has a Javanese background, could present these aspects intellectually. Hopefully, this research can contribute academically and professionally in film studies and also other areas, especially as a strategy to develop local insights as the identification of Indonesian films.

Suggestions

As the final exposure and expectation, it should be emphasized that the analysis of *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban* film holds a limitation that based on specific approach and method. Obviously, this limitation needs to be explored; some issues still need to be analyzed. As example, an issue about how aesthetic aspect in this film can connect with its thematic form; also an issue about how to understand Hanung Bramantyo's perspective as a filmmaker so that he chose to develop this kind of films. Therefore, this kind of issues hopefully can be studied further by other researchers in the near future.

References

- Alton, John. (2013), *Painting with Light*. Barkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press.
- Barker, Chris.(2011), *Cultural Studies, Teori dan Praktik*. Yogyakarta: Bentang
- Kellner, Douglas. (2010), *Budaya Media, Cultural Studies, Identitas, dan Politik: Antara Modern dan Posmodern*. Yogyakarta: Jalasutra
- Musman, Ati.(2015), *10 Filosofi Hidup Orang Jawa: Kunci Sukses Bahagia Lahir Batin*. Yogyakarta: Shira Media.
- Mangkudimedja, R.M.(1979),. *Serat Pararaton Ken Arok* (buku 2), Depdikbud, Jakarta.
- Najib, Emha. (1991), *Cahaya Maha Cahaya*, Kumpulan Puisi, Pustaka Firdaus.
- Pratista, Himawan. (2008), *Memahami Film*. Yogyakarta: Homerian Pustaka.
- Ranciere, J. (2006), *Film Fables*. Berg: Oxford
- Saidi, Acep.Iwan.(2008), *Narasi Simbolik Seni Rupa Kontemporer Indonesia*, Yogyakarta: Isac Book
- Short, T.L.(2007), *Peirce's Theory of Sign*, New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Soetarno, Sunardi, Sudarsono. (2007), *Estetika Pedalangan*. Surakarta: Institut Seni Indonesia (ISI).
- Sugiharto, Bambang. (2013), *Untuk Apa Seni*. Bandung: Matahari