

The Supremacy of Lighting in Hanung Bramantyo's Film: The Cultural Studies of Chiaroscuro in *Sang Pencerah* and *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban* Film

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Abstract

This paper will present the significant role of lighting in film. The word 'supremacy' that became the focus of this research was not interpreted as the King's entity that illuminates his followers (from the one who holds control into the one who is controlled). Instead, it was understood as an entity that emerged naturally in each individual and would be emitted in many forms. In this context, resistance could also be stated as the expressive supremacy. *Chiaroscuro* is a lighting technique in film that can produce a dramatic aspect in the scene's visualisation. The study of lighting is not only limited on technical aspect but also focused on other lighting aspects. As example, the light's darkness-brightness correlated with the expressive supremacy that was emitted by specific character in the film's scene. To overcome that issue, this research applied cultural studies and interdisciplinary as its methods. Through this method, the issue of supremacy would be faced as a cultural daily issue. Thus, the issue of supremacy could not be positioned as an individual issue but more as an issue that related with its external aspects. Based on this research, there are some interesting findings. Firstly, the supremacy light that was emitted from the film's *chiaroscuro* held significant relation with traditional and cultural values of Javanese societies who became the main focus of the film's narrative. Secondly, the interpretation of supremacy held a linear comparison with spiritual-religious values, especially in Islamic perspective as the main theme of both films. Thirdly, in some aspects, there were some relations between the meaning of supremacy and righteousness, both in traditional and spiritual-religious values. Lastly, *chiaroscuro* in the film was not merely a technical issue of brightness-darkness, but more thematic since light is a source of supremacy.

Keywords: *chiaroscuro*, film, supremacy, culture, Javanese

1. Introduction

Supremacy is one of the fundamental topics when it comes to man's life. It can be said that human's existence would not have been possible without it. The basic notion is that human's existence is a testament to God's supremacy. In other words, God exists because there are things created, while humans are the most perfection creation of God. Human's perfection, thus, is in line with the perfect supremacy of God.

As a creation of God, humans harbour a desire for supremacy. Desire in human, both positive and negative one, is the essential attribute of humans. A popular view on the history of human philosophy expressed by Thomas Hobbes also discussed human's supremacy. In his view, one man can be a 'wolf' to other men. Paradigm of modernism that places humans rather than nature as a central (egocentrism) explains how supremacy can become a factor to the way humans perceive themselves. If it is seen in a larger context, Karl Max suggests that human history is a history of conflict regarding class system, which essentially results from the desire for supremacy.

With that in mind, supremacy has become a topic that is continuously discussed in various aspects of life. This also applies to art. Regardless of its form and variation, a piece of art always includes this theme in many art genres such as literature, drama, art performance, fine arts, film, and so forth. It may be a central theme, or perhaps a secondary theme. It may also be a theme in the context of practical supremacy (politic), psychological context, cultural context, and spiritual context (God's supremacy).

In the movie industry in Indonesia, such topics of supremacy often appear in lots of movies. Movies such as *Si Pitung*, *Janur Kuning*, *G30 S/PKI*, *Cut Nyak Dien*, hingga *Soekarno* are examples of movies that concentrate on supremacy. Such movies may be seen as movies that focus on determination, and that makes the aspect of supremacy become the central theme. Also, movies such as *Wali Songo*, *Rinduku Padamu Tuhan*, *Tenggelamnya Kapal Van Derwijk*, *Ayat-Ayat Cinta*, *Sang Pencerah*, *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban*, *Negeri 9 Menara*, dan *99 Cahaya di Langit Eropa* are movies representing God's supremacy.

One interesting point is that the qualities of supremacy are not always expressed through the verbal communication in the story, but rather through other aspects such as setting, plot, and certain objects. In such aspects, the qualities of supremacy may appear as a sign with numerous intensities. *Chiaroscuro*, a basic lighting technique, is one of the ways to deliver such qualities.

This writing discusses how the qualities of supremacy are presented aesthetically with *chiaroscuro* in movies such as *Sang Pencerah* (SP) and *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban* (PBKS) by Hanung Bramantyo. These

two movies were chosen because they both share the same theme; that is, there are religious as well as spiritual values. It can be seen in the movies how spiritual supremacy (God), subject's supremacy, and political supremacy merge together, consequently resulting in complexity. Another reason is because both are challenging and problematic, and therein lies the great appeal. In artistic aspect, both have their own characteristic use of *chiaroscuro* that is more dominant in comparison to other movies by Hanung. Aside from receiving the tremendous appreciation from both national and international audience, these movies have also made Hanung the most brilliant and controversial director in this era.

2. Methods

In reference to the study about supremacy in *chiaroscuro*, this can then be regarded as a piece of cultural work, not as a movie for the movie itself (art for art sake). As a cultural work, a film is a combination of meaning and value. Considering that a film by Hanung is a contemporary work with plenty of social issues, the writer has decided to choose *cultural studies* perspective. In this perspective, culture is seen as a daily issue with numerous aspects and conflicts. Therefore, the movies should be analyzed using the interdisciplinary method as opposed to the mono-disciplinary one.

In general, interdisciplinary method can be defined in a number of ways. *Firstly*, it is a device to analyze a research object by involving several disciplines that are relevant to the research problem, which Rohidi (2011) calls 'ontological fact'. However, all the different disciplines still concentrate on one main discipline (Saidi, 2015: 18). *Secondly*, it is an ideal method as it deals with a wide range of issues, but a research needs to have only one focus, which also represents the writer's preference in seeing and dealing with the cultural issue. *Thirdly*, as a method, inter-discipline cannot be separated from the discipline itself. In other words, analysis of cultural issues as complex daily issues cannot disregard the concept of culture that was already established.

The Textual Facts of Movie *Sang Pencerah* and *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban*

In relation to the topic of supremacy in *chiaroscuro*, its significance is apparent in SP and PBS movies. The stories in both movies show a strong connection with supremacy. Apart from the things the movies have in common, there are, of course, a few noticeable differences.

SP is a biography movie of Ahmad Dahlan, a modern Muslim figure who established Muhammadiyah, which is one of the biggest Muslim organizations in Indonesia. Despite its biographical story, this movie does not fall into the category of documentary film, but rather a semi-documentary film due to the writer's dominant thoughts on it. The story is about Ahmad Dahlan's determination to fight against dominant cultural system that affects the spiritual belief of people in Yogyakarta in the 20th century. It is regarded by Ahmad Dahlan as an orthodox and stupid cultural system. To achieve his objective, he establishes a Muslim organization which he names Muhammadiyah. When placed in a certain context, it can be perceived as an organization of supremacy and ideology.

PBKS is a movie adapted from a novel with the same title by Abidal El-Khalieqi. This movie illustrates a girl's determination to fight for her social rights. Annisa is a daughter of a kyai (religious scholar) who owns an Islamic boarding school to accommodate female students in an isolated area of Yogyakarta. Since she was a kid, she has always been a rebel against her father. She also rebels against the environment that imposes a rule where girls shall obey boys. Her father forces her to get married with a man, but then they divorce and she moves to Yogyakarta to go to college and become women's rights activist. She finally gets married with a man she loves. Furthermore, she succeeds in convincing her two brothers to establish a library in the Islamic boarding school that is passed down by her parent.

Light as Representation of Righteousness Values

Based on the story, it is apparent that these two movies place a strong emphasis on supremacy and a position that many want to take. It is worth noting that 'supremacy' in this context is not necessarily the same as it is in politics, but rather one that exists within every human being as part of our fundamental attribute. In this context, resistance and the desire to feel right are also part of potential supremacy.

Annisa's case with her father in PBKS movie can be seen as the example of this. The authoritarian parenting style of her father indicates that he holds the supremacy and Annisa is the victim. However, her resistance against her father also signifies the quality of supremacy. The resistance also implies that she feels she is right and that she has to constantly fight for it.

It is interesting to see how Bramantyo, the director, utilizes the lighting techniques (*chiaroscuro*) to signify the events concerning supremacy. The events include both horizontal relationship among humans, and vertical relationship between human and God. Such techniques can be seen in the picture below.



Picture 1. One of the illustrations in the opening.

Source: *Sang Pencerah* Movie, documented by the writer (2016)

The placement of the sun behind the dome as seen in the picture is not, of course, without a reason. It is for the purpose of ‘visual idiom’ that is carefully selected by the director. In Pierce semiotics perspective (Short, 2007), the sunshine and the dome are the index that refers to the concept of deity or God in the context of Muslim. Dome is *simile pars pro toto*, which is a part that represents the whole thing of a mosque (a place of worship of Muslims). Dome, therefore, symbolizes spiritual values: Allah seen as the Right, Great, and Majestic. These values blend in harmony with the sunshine. The sun is the natural object, which, according to Muslim teaching, is a representation of God’s existence, greatness, and supremacy. The shine itself is ‘nur’. God is Glorious Light, the source of all light sources. Found in a Al-Quran *An-Nur* letter is a sentence that says “*nurin ala nur*”, meaning “light above light”. It suggests that God is not the light that normally appears since the light itself is the creation of God, namely the sun. God controls the sun. It can therefore be said that the sun, as a source of light, is a sign of God’s supremacy.

Next, the combination of sunshine and the dome is contrasted with the dark clouds and the dim lighting around the mosque. The contrast results in an unusual atmosphere. The sun, which should provide well spread illumination, seems to be enlightening itself and the dome. The sun then appears to be a shining ball that has just emerged from the source (newly created). It is clear that the sun is meant to indicate a birth, and in this particular case, it indicates the birth of Ahmad Dahlan’s baby. The conclusion is that Ahmad Dahlan is the nominated light of truth. By God’s power, Dahlan is sent to give enlightenment to people undergoing an unpleasant situation (represented by the darkness), particularly in its relation to problems pertaining to belief and religious ritual.

Discussion about light as a source of power can be related to Javanese’s cultural belief. The myth of authority in Javanese is strongly associated with the myth of light. In *Serat Pararaton* (Mangkudimedja, 1979), which is a holy book consisting of stories about kings in Java, it is told that Ken Arok successfully became a great king in Java after he took Ken Dedes away from her husband and married her afterwards. Ken Dedes was believed to possess a sense of greatness as she had a light in her crotch.

In addition, Benedict Anderson (2000) explains, in reference to Moertono, what is called *teja* (light emission) “The presence of supremacy in daily life is often characterized by *teja*, which emerges from the expressions of the person with such supremacy” said Andersen. It is apparent in cases in Javanese narrative. An authority that loses their light will consequently lose their supremacy (2000: 39).



Picture 2. One of the illustrations in *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban*.

Source: *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban* Movie, documented by the writer (2016)

In *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban* movie, it is clear how lights are combined in such a way that creates certain intensity and signifies the appearance of the character in the room (bed room). The open window in the bedroom creates the impression of the light coming from outside, which illuminates the room (indicated by the dashed arrow). This is a natural light, where, in this context, the subject (character) is. This situation is accentuated by the means of lighting (artificial light from above) directed towards the face of Annisa as well as that of her baby (indicated by the arrow). In other scenes, the combination of lights by the director is very consistent on Annisa in this movie, and Ahmad Dahlan in *Sang Pencerah* movie.

Light and Partiality

Another question that arises is ‘Why would the light be directed towards certain characters?’ In this case, it is directed at Ahmad Dahlan in SP movie, and Annisa in PBKS movie. The question holds a degree of importance considering that the ‘rival’ of Ahmad Dahlan, namely The Great Imam of the Great Mosque of Yogyakarta, is not an antagonist, nor a villain. These movies do not place the characters in protagonist-antagonist position like other movies would. The conflicts result from opposing views. The Great Imam represents the tradition, whereas Ahmad Dahlan is the representation of the modern Imam.

The same applies to Annisa versus her father. Annisa’s father and family are not like the usual villains who would harm the character, who, in this case, is Annisa. In fact, they love Annisa. Their conflicting views on reality are the underlying reason behind the clash. The main problem results from the accentuation on the position of the characters where one appears very dominant while the other is the opposite. One is established, while the other one is at the other of the spectrum.

If this is how it works, considering the core meaning of a light as explained above, the Great Imam and Annisa’s father should have the light, shouldn’t they? Both parties have their own belief, religiosity, as well as supremacy, don’t they? However, that is not what the director does. To find the reason why requires a discussion about the director’s ideology. It goes without saying that a director has a purpose and ideas which he presents in his work. Most of the time, a director has a preference for certain values which he thinks are true.

In *cultural studies* perspective, both movies have a structuralist postal ideology. The director shows a preference for a rebellious character, at least one that questions a well-established system. Ahmad Dahlan, at that time (early of 20th century), is a character coming from the ‘future’ who criticizes the dark situation at that time. Ahmad Dahlan is a modernist who sees the world from a new point of view. Annisa, likewise, is an ideological person who fights against an ideology that was already established, which was the authority of men. Annisa questions and rebels against the inequity towards herself as a woman, and in this case, she represents other women as well.

An interesting point from both movies is the marked difference in the ideologies of both main characters. Whereas Ahmad Dahlan is a modernist, Annisa is post-modernist. That is, Ahmad Dahlan believes that modernism is an ideal concept that questions the previously dominant system, which is a tradition. On the contrary, Annisa doubts the paradigm of modernism that places men as the centre of civilization (patriarchy) and women as subordinates.

Such a difference stems from the fact that both movies are based on two different eras. The story of SP movie is based in early of 20th century while that of PBKS is in the late of 20th century. This proves the point that there is no such thing as permanent values, as relativity affects them.

5. Conclusions

An interesting finding can be drawn from the analysis above. First of all, supremacy in *chiaroscuro* in both SP and PBKS movies is one that relates to values that exist among people, particularly Javanese people. For Javanese people, there is nothing that can stand alone. Religion, for instance, does not only concern the religion itself, but it is connected with other things. Therefore, in Java, there is such a thing called syncretism, which is essentially the fusion of religion and culture. The same applies to light; the light in SP and PBKS movies is one that represents the values of spiritual religion (God’s power) as well as culture (myth).

Secondly, based on the first point, *chiaroscuro* is used by the director not only as a media for aspect of dark-bright gradation, but also as a media to explore the thematic aspect. Accordingly, form of aesthetics and the content cohere strongly, which Sugiharto (2013) calls ‘essence of aesthetics’; between *surface structure* and *deep structure*. In this level, *chiaroscuro* is the media that creates a message, value, and meaning of culture.

It can be concluded that with a careful artistic order of *chiaroscuro*, a movie is not merely *an sich* movie, but it is a life itself. Thus, as a cultural work, a movie is a product of a culture. Different cultures generate different products.

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