



UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

Debate [on: K. Strassler (2020) Demanding Images: Democracy, mediation, and the image-event in Indonesia].- 2

Lurking Authoritarianism and Reclaiming Image-Making

Strassler, K.; Kloos, D.; Juliastuti, N.; Samuels, A.

DOI

[10.1163/22134379-17702016](https://doi.org/10.1163/22134379-17702016)

Publication date

2021

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde

License

CC BY

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Strassler, K., Kloos, D., Juliastuti, N., & Samuels, A. (2021). Debate [on: K. Strassler (2020) Demanding Images: Democracy, mediation, and the image-event in Indonesia].- 2: Lurking Authoritarianism and Reclaiming Image-Making. *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde*, 177(2-3), 382-384. <https://doi.org/10.1163/22134379-17702016>

General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

UvA-DARE is a service provided by the library of the University of Amsterdam (<https://dare.uva.nl>)

2 Lurking Authoritarianism and Reclaiming Image-Making

Karen Strassler's latest book, *Demanding images: Democracy, mediation, and the image-event in Indonesia*, focuses on how to conduct an ethnographic study on the public sphere in post-authoritarian Indonesia. Strassler argues that the 'image-event' is a productive perspective from which to do so. The conceptualization of the image-event revolves around the idea of emphasizing the eventfulness of the image and its position as the catalyst for unfolding events. The image-event approach de-centres the origin and production aspects of an image, its intention, and its meaning, and focuses instead on how an image functions as the productive site for disturbances and new arrangements of power, knowledge, and culture.

Public space and publicness hold privileged positions in this book due to Strassler's argument that the public sphere is the zone that indicates how democracy continues to be a work in progress. During the New Order era, public support played an important role in demonstrating the stance of civil society towards the authorities. Control of the public-communication platforms was vital to the ability to instil the idea of hegemony, the ideas disseminated by propaganda, the sense of fear, and the need for communal security. Strassler insists that it is only by examining the political process resulting from the entanglements between images and events, and how these reverberate with other images and events, that we can see the demands and questions at stake in image production in post-authoritarian communities.

The structure of the book follows the articulation of several important questions in the post-Reformasi era about transparency, authenticity, honesty, and openness. Spanning from the early period of reformation to the presidential election in 2014, each case study discusses the tools and principles used to express thoughts and how these are used to imagine political agency. The book offers an analysis and documentation of how people practised a diverse set of techniques to embrace newly acquired political agency and produce polyphonic voices and a pluralistic vision.

Post-1998, the public sphere has emerged as a new zone in which various visions of how to regulate the relations between the state and the people have

competed with each other. The public sphere offers more space for freedom and has become messy and crowded at the same time. The period has seen the rise of different groups, all driven and informed by particular demands and struggles. The analysis of these competing visions is best illustrated in Chapter 2, 'The gender transparency', in the discussion about the rape of Chinese Indonesian women during the unrest in May 1998, where the competing visions emerge in the debate on truth. The meaning of truth does not lie in the exposure of the rape images, which might spark further discussion about explicit content. Rather, the chapter made clear that the obsession with authenticity had failed to protect the women and capture the complex racial historical dimensions surrounding the event. It hindered attempts to ensure transparency from those in political power and the actors who enabled the unfortunate event. In the discussion about pornographic images and the sex scandals of politicians, celebrities, and visual artists in Chapter 3, 'The scandal of exposure', Strassler complicates the notion of public space by acknowledging that it includes new public figures who have crafted their own ways of engaging in the popular discourse on morality and credibility. The chapter stands out because it also examines a diverse selection of image producers who practise their own style of visibility and weave their way in and out of the public sphere to obtain anonymity and create counter-images.

The image-event is the circumstance through which authority is constantly made and unmade. The people featured in the book shared the cracked public space of the New Order regime, in which they honed their skills to interrogate the past and survive certain memories. Strassler argues that image-making is a method of worlding, allowing them to remake their lives and elaborate a certain vision. Does this mean that each engagement in image-making leads to specific modes of political agency? My view is that in the spaces where the image-event takes place, fear, intensity, and uncertainty collide. This enables a certain imagination with regard to thoughts about the state. This leads me to another question: do the questions posed when analysing a media-event have to be connected to ideas about the state? Strassler's point about image-making as being a worlding activity is important, because it serves as the link between vision and social justice. What kinds of ethics guide the principles of social justice in this regard?

In Chapter 5, 'Street signs', the analysis of the street artists shows that to work with images means to reflect on a city that is constantly changing and illustrates how the artists contextualize their practices within their immediate social environment using a set of ethical questions. In the case of Yogyakarta, 'change' means that the city is increasingly for sale. The politics of the city are increasingly heated and polarized. The city is becoming unbearable. One only needs to glance at the city walls to see this: stickers and silk-screen posters

protesting against the changes in the city are pasted on the walls alongside contrasting signs produced by right-wing religious groups. This proximity epitomizes the growing friction and tension. To inhabit the city means to express solidarity with certain marginalized views.

The people in the chapter reflected on the same issues—the killing of human rights activist Munir and the existence of vigilantes—through the same means, such as making murals and graffiti artwork, in the spirit of developing a collective mind. Their knowledge of the systemic abuse and the repressive histories of the state has equipped them with the intellectual tools necessary to articulate unresolved issues and guided them to formulate the necessary action. But how does this process happen? What kind of ability does one need to have to assess the lurking authoritarian vision? How do people from different generations reclaim image-making as a site to learn and unlearn histories while addressing their intergenerational social and political trauma at the same time? This chapter seems to suggest that image-making is directed to realize collective action. I think further analysis of this would strengthen the theorization of the image-event concept. The book provides a valuable contribution to the link between media consumption, participatory culture, and the outward appearances of social-political commentary.

Nuraini Juliastuti

Kunci Study Forum & Collective, Yogyakarta, Indonesia;

University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

njuliastuti@gmail.com