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Date: August 21, 2024

Middle Cinema - Navigating art, capitalism, and failure in the Indonesian film boom

A dissertation presented by

Galen Stolee

to

the Department of Anthropology

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy in the subject of

Social Anthropology

Harvard University

Cambridge, Massachusetts

August 2024

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Abstract

Drawing from three years of ethnographic research and observant participation, my dissertation centers on Indonesian popular cinema at a dynamic moment for the industry, having now become the most dominant in Southeast Asia. Theater attendance numbers are climbing to heights unimaginable two decades ago, driven by a growing middle class, increased foreign investment, and the enthusiasm of Gen-Z, who despite coming of age in the TikTok era, constitute the vast majority of Indonesian moviegoers today.

But inside the film industry, producers still struggle to synthesize two distinct threads of cinema, the ‘mainstream’ romance and horror films that draw millions of young Indonesians to theaters but rarely break from established formulas and are seldom seen internationally, and the 'arthouse' films that attempt to experiment with form, provoke viewers with new themes or social critique, and have recently won critical acclaim at international film festivals, but are rarely watched by Indonesians. The late Indonesian director Richard Oh referred to this synthesis as "middle cinema”—a distinctly Indonesian form that could entertain and challenge audiences, and which he felt was critical for his nation’s filmmakers to develop their medium’s potential for building social consciousness within Indonesia and “soft power” abroad.

When I was hired by a Jakarta film studio to create and produce a streaming comedy-drama miniseries about Indonesians encountering the new age spiritual tourism world in Bali, my intention from the onset was to seek out this middle space myself, applying everything I'd learned as student of both anthropology and of film, to craft an experience with my Indonesian co-producers and writers that would attract local and international audiences, while also introducing new formal styles and social themes that might inspire further experiments. The frictions we encountered—between the global and the local, the producer and their audience, and between art and commerce—together illustrate the impossibility and inevitability of dreaming big in the semi-periphery.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

TITLE PAGE ..... **I**

COPYRIGHT ..... **II**

ABSTRACT ..... **III**

TABLE OF CONTENTS ..... **IV**

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ..... **VI**

INTRODUCTION **1**

The Invisible Country 7
Epic Fail 14
Indonesian Film Studies in Three Phases 20
A Method in the Loose Sense of the Term 23
Dimensions of the Imaginary 28
The Shape of Things to Come 32

CHAPTER 1: PROLOGUE **36**

Hatching a Plan 36
The Concept 45
The Pitch 50

CHAPTER 2: SIMULACRA AND SIMULATION IN BALI **53**

A Brief History of Bali (and Ubud) on Film 54
Tourists and Mystics 60
Eat, Pray, Loathe 67
Naughty Tourists: The Backlash 74

CHAPTER 3: *UBUDIANS* COMES TO LIFE **81**

Directors and Actors 82
The Writing Bottleneck 86
Finding the Team 91
The Bootcamp 95
Andi and Lila 98
The Mother Problem 100
The Rest of the Story 105

CHAPTER 4: THE GLOBAL AND THE LOCAL 107

A Note on Surrealism 108
Growing Pains 115
Off the Deep End 119
The Drink 124
Notes on a Balinese Cockfight 128
The Egg 134
Permission to Deconstruct 137

CHAPTER 5: THE PRODUCER AND THE AUDIENCE 141

Hello, Netflix 141
Mass Appeal 143
Going Mainstream 150
It's Not TV 157

CHAPTER 6: ART AND COMMERCE 164

Bye Bye, Bules 164
The Look 167
Cover Versions 169
Chindo 171
'The Chinese Problem' 176
Time Travel 183
Casting Failure 190

EPILOGUE: TO BE CONTINUED… 196

Unhappy Art 197
Lost in Translation 202
It's the Economy, Stupid 204

BIBLIOGRAPHY 207

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While the academy has yet to make good on long-standing demands for rethinking authorship, I nonetheless view this dissertation as a collaborative effort between myself and my creative collaborators at Visinema Pictures. This includes my co-writers and co-dreamers on Ubudians, Gabrielle Dhillon, Ifan Ismail, Ni Luh Febri Darmayanti, and Rain Chudori. We really crafted something special together, and I hope one day it will emerge in whatever form it ends up taking. Special thanks go to Taufan Adryan, who had an immensely difficult an unenviable task of reconciling our vision with the harsh realities of budgeting. His creative instincts and input into the show cannot be overstated. And to Vega Cahyaningsih, for keeping us all on task. Additional thanks to Cristian Imanuell, Echa Latjuba, Husein M. Atmodjo, M. Irfan Ramli, and Mia Santosa for all our incredible conversations, and for their contributions to the show. To Dara D. Wirjodihardjo, much gratitude for always being attentive to me as a strange pseudo-employee.

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For Mary

Introduction

"Cinema is an unhappy art because it depends on money."

Andrei Tarkovsky

March 4, 2021

Visinema HQ, Jakarta

I'm sitting in the office of Indonesian filmmaker Angga Sasongko, at the headquarters of his production company Visinema Pictures in the Cilandak district of South Jakarta. It's our first meeting, and we've been taking for nearly an hour about Indonesia as a "leapfrog" country. The term is sometimes used to describe the phenomenon of skipping through the deterministic chain of technological progression, such as when Indonesia began adopting television in the 1960s while the country's literacy rate was still 5%, or in the 2010s, when internet access grew from 10% to over 50%, with most people going online for the first time through smartphones rather than home computers.

This dynamic has rooted itself in the attitudes of many Indonesians, who frequently express to me a paradoxical feeling of being extremely proud of their nation's achievements, while simultaneously frustrated or embarrassed to be so far "behind". In the world of Indonesian cinema, filmmakers have sometimes responded to this tension through ambitious leapfrog projects of their own, like attempting to capture international audiences with a big budget action film, or trying to gain global prestige by winning Best Foreign Film at the Academy Awards, goals that still yet remain elusive.

"It's a waste of time and energy," Angga tells me. "You could put 5 years and millions of dollars into one international project that would go nowhere. It would get shown in LA for one week. Then what? It's not going to be our *Parasite*."

Angga is referring to the 2019 dark comedy/social thriller from South Korean auteur Bong Joon-ho, which defied expectations by earning a quarter-billion dollars in global box office and winning both the Palme d'Or at Cannes and the Academy Award for Best Picture, the first non-English language film to do so. Its achievement, especially on a budget of $11.4 million dollars (paltry by Hollywood standards but just barely imaginable for an ambitious and well-connected Indonesian director), still reverberates across Asia, and gives hope to many creators and lovers of less globally recognized national cinemas, particularly those in Southeast Asia.

For Angga, it's one leap too many. "We're not ready yet. We make popular films that aren't quality enough for the upper class, and we make artsy films that are too boring for the lower class." The reason *Parasite* did so well, he argues, is that South Korean filmmakers took their time in finding a balance between local familiarity and global cosmopolitan tastes. "But we won't get the audience in California until we can capture our whole audience here… become masters in our own house".

July 11, 2022

Kota Lama, Semarang

It's about 3:30 in the morning, and I'm in the back of a taxi heading back to my hotel from the historic Dutch colonial quarter of Semarang in Central Java, where director Anggi Yosep Noen has been shooting his new film, the dystopian sci-fi detective story *24 Jam Bersama Gaspar (24 Hours With Gaspar)*. I've been on set for nearly 12 hours, and while I don't make

any claim that my job as “observer” is remotely as strenuous as those actually working on the film, I’m fully exhausted. But my driver Budiman, like almost every taxi driver I’ve encountered in Indonesia, has just had a coffee and is in a chatty mood. As usual, I’m too polite to decline.

We talk about how last year, at the age of 55, his career as a telecom systems manager came to a sudden halt as the Covid-19 pandemic shuttered his company. Ever since then he’s been doing odd jobs in the day and driving for the ride-hailing app Grab at night. He wants to know what I’m doing in Semarang, and when I explain that I’m following a film production, he excitedly exclaims that he’s a movie lover himself, and wants to know more about the project. I tell him it’s set in a near-future Jakarta, after a plague and political instability have ravaged Indonesia, and climate change has flooded half the city. A cynical, antisocial detective with one day to live must navigate street gangs and fight clubs to solve a mystery with the potential to uncover a dark, buried national trauma.

“Doesn’t sound very good,” he tells me bluntly. A bit defensively, I assure him that it’s being directed by one of Indonesia’s best filmmakers, features top acting talent, and is full of captivating imagery and original themes. “Yes, but I don’t think people will watch it.” I ask him why, in return receiving a brief lecture on Indonesian film audiences, and why the only genres they’ll accept are comedy, drama, and horror. Counting off on three fingers, he concludes with “we go to the theater for three things: to be forced to laugh (*dipaksa tertawa*), forced to cry (*dipaksa menangis*), and forced to scream (*dipaksa teriak*). Without that, there’s no reason to go.”

Naturally, my pretentious follow-up question is “what about movies that force you to think (*dipaksa berpikir*)?” He laughs, as if to take pity on my naivete. "This is Indonesia. Life is already heavy enough. We work very hard, and no one wants to finish a week of work and spend

money at the cinema and be forced to think about more heavy things." I ask him what an Indonesian filmmaker should do if they want to introduce something new to the audience.

In English, he wryly responds: “the customer is always right”.

November 23, 2021

JAFF, Yogyakarta

I’ve just walked out of my fourth screening of the day at the 16th Jogja-NETPAC Asian Film Festival (JAFF) in the Javanese city and sultanate of Yogyakarta (or Jogja). The festival is buzzing with excitement, not over the premieres of new films from international heavyweights like Japanese Ryusuke Hamaguchi (*Drive My Car*) or Iranian Asghar Farhadi (*A Hero*), but instead for a trio of internationally celebrated Indonesian films that were making their debut at home.

Jogja’s own Wregas Bhanuteja screened his first feature *Penyalin Cahaya* (*Photocopier*), a reflection on campus sexual harassment which had already bowed at the Busan International Film Festival and swept the Piala Citra (Indonesia’s Academy Awards) with 12 wins, the most of any single film in history. Kamila Andini brought her newest film, the coming-of-age story *Yuni*, which had debuted at the Toronto International Film Festival, where it won the Platform Prize. The top attraction was *Seperti Dendam, Rindu Harus Dibayar Tuntas (Vengeance Is Mine, All Others Pay Cash),* the retro action-comedy directed by the enigmatic Edwin, which had just won the prestigious Golden Leopard, the top prize at the Locarno International Film Festival, a first for the country.

The default social epicenter of the unassuming five-screen Empire XXI cineplex is the small Starbucks located directly outside the side entrance. At any hour of the day, groups of

filmmakers can be found enjoying drinks and chatting between screenings. Veteran indie actor/director Paul Agusta can frequently be seen holding court there, young alumni from his Bengkel Akting Kuma workshop for aspiring thespians. Joko Anwar and his network of collaborators also take over the patio at times, sometimes intermingling with Paul's squad (himself a longtime friend and collaborator of Joko's). Everyone seems to be optimistic about what seems to be a new golden age in Indonesian filmmaking. The term “new wave” is thrown about more than a few times.

Sitting alone amongst the revelers I spot senior filmmaker Richard Oh, who seems to be sulking. Richard, who passed away in 2022 at 62, was a wellspring of knowledge about film history, both Indonesian and global. He was also never shy with his opinions on the work of his colleagues, positive or (more often) negative, nor did he have any trouble being candid about his own frustrations and failures. I tell him how thrilled I am about these terrific new films, and ask him how he feels to be showing his own latest, Menunggu Bunda, the next day. He starts going off about problems with the edit, issues with the performances, and the limited budget. “But you’re happy with the outcome?”, I ask.

He sighs heavily and waits a moment to speak. "You can't win the war," he says cryptically. "You can only win a bit of battles here and there. But you gotta fight for it. Like this film, I really fought, and it nearly killed me. Did I win? Not necessarily." I ask him who he was fighting. "Everyone. The fucking guy with the money. The audience. Myself." I tell him that this war feels familiar to me as a student of film, even in the United States, where so many more opportunities exist to create art. Richard sinks back into his seat and responds.

"But in Indonesia, the war never ends. If you ever try to make a film here, you’ll see.”

This dissertation is a first-hand account of the experience of trying to produce film in contemporary Indonesia. Specifically, one category of film, which Angga Sasongko referred to as "the sweet spot", what Budiman called "a compromise", and what Richard Oh took to calling "middle cinema". It's an elusive terrain to define, but is nonetheless a goal shared by many filmmakers in Indonesia (and around the world), a balance between two distinct threads of national cinema: the 'mainstream' romance, comedy, and horror films that draw millions of young Indonesians to theaters but rarely break from established formulas and are seldom seen internationally, and the 'arthouse' films that aim to experiment with form, provoke viewers with new themes or social commentary, and have in recent years won increasing critical acclaim at international film festivals, but are rarely if ever watched back in Indonesia.

My research began on film sets, observing mainstream filmmakers like Angga and arthouse directors like Anggi in their mutual attempts to push toward that middle space. Both were working on new projects for Visinema Pictures, a Jakarta-based film company founded by Angga, who also serves as CEO. But these relationships gradually evolved into creative partnerships as Angga approached me with an idea for a streaming television series about Indonesians encountering the new age spiritual tourist mecca of Ubud in Bali, asking me to serve as creator and showrunner, with Anggi coming onboard as director. The development of that series, *Ubudians*, forms the central narrative of this dissertation. Angga and I believed that my own "middle" position—as a foreigner trained in US film theory and production who'd spent the last decade studying Indonesian language and culture—could be productive in exploring new ground in middle cinema (albeit on a smaller screen).

But venturing into that middle space is not a frictionless effort. The three anecdotes above reflect three oppositional tensions, which frustrate and often thwart such efforts for

Indonesian filmmakers, and which shaped my own experience with *Ubudians* in the latter half of this dissertation. The first involves the global and the local, and the struggle within Indonesian cinema to define and represent the nation to the world while navigating the regime of implicit and explicit standards of taste and quality that Michael Herzfeld (2004) calls the "global hierarchy of value". The second is the complex push-and-pull between film producers and their audiences, who through individual and collective motivations and preferences—and mediated by technological innovation—come to shape each other and together co-create the bounds of what can be considered mainstream. And lastly, there's the age-old conflict between art and commerce, and the stark reality that experimentation in film, one of the most (if not *the* most) expensive forms of creative expression, will always be necessarily limited by the economic structures of the Indonesian nation-state, and those of the world.

But in order to understand the motivations of Indonesian filmmakers negotiating these often awkward middle spaces in pursuit of a middle cinema to represent themselves to their country and to the world, it's first necessary to consider how they perceive themselves and their place in the world. This involves exploring one more middle space, as I set out to do below, between core and periphery, subject and object, seen and unseen.

The Invisible Country

Most people I've met from Indonesia, as well as those who study it, would likely agree with journalist Elizabeth Pisani's (2014) provocative claim that it is "the most invisible country in the world". To clarify, this is not meant to imply that Indonesia is more obscure than, say, São Tomé and Príncipe. But for being the world's fourth largest country by population (roughly one in 30 living humans is Indonesian), it plays a remarkably small role in the contemporary global

imagination. I rarely encounter anyone outside Indonesia with even a casual working knowledge of the country's history or culture, in the way almost anyone I meet is likely to know at least some basic information about South Africa (e.g. Dutch/British colonialism, apartheid, Nelson Mandela, Die Antwoord), a country with one-fifth the population and economic output. This is especially striking when one considers how the archipelago has shaped the modern world.

It was Indonesian spices like cloves, nutmeg, and mace, located in the Maluku islands between Sulawesi and New Guinea, that sparked the so-called "Age of Discovery", as Portuguese expeditions sailed around the southern tip of Africa in search of a sea route to break the Venetian and Arab monopolies over trade products from what was then called the "East Indies". It was those same spices which sent the Spanish west across the Atlantic to find yet another hypothesized route, instead stumbling upon the Americas, which they decided to call the "West Indies", a name that endures to this day, presumably as a permanent reminder of European intellectual hubris. Dutch efforts to wrest control of the spices from the Portuguese led to the creation of the world's first publicly-traded multinational corporation, the Dutch East India Company (VOC), laying the foundation for the modern structures of extractive colonialism, finance capitalism, and globalization (Ricklefs 2008).

Indonesia's successful 1945-1949 war of independence against the Dutch helped inspire a wave of mid-20th century decolonization campaigns across Asia and Africa (Reybrouck 2024), its charismatic hero Sukarno becoming a key architect of the Non-Aligned Movement of "third world" countries striving for independence from both Western and Soviet global hegemony (Legge 1984). The 1965-66 mass killings and arrests of untold millions of suspected communists and leftists by the Indonesian army and affiliated vigilante groups was in part instigated and supported by the United States government, an experiment whose success would be reproduced

in subsequent decades in third world countries throughout Asia, Africa, and the Americas, with increasing efficiency and ruthlessness (Bevins 2020).

And yet, despite the utter centrality of Indonesia to the story of modernity, it's often not treated as if that's that case, especially outside of the academy, but also within it. Anthropology has been partly to blame for this. Indonesia's rich diversity of pre-industrial culture, art, and ritual proved irresistible for early social scientists embarking from Western nations in search of exotic primitivism in the colonies, often gaining status through claims of exclusive "knowledge of the natives" (Kommers and Buskens 2007; Stoler 2002). During the Cold War, anthropology in Indonesia was often funded by, and complicit in, Western imperialist projects of surveillance and control (Price 2016). Even as the discipline evolved in the second half of the 20th century, there remained a tendency, however implicit, toward provincializing Indonesian society as opposed to viewing its modernity on its own terms (Chakrabarty 2009; Legêne et al. 2015). Thankfully, as we'll see, this has changed in recent decades.

Given the sheer improbability of building a nation out of 1,300+ ethnic groups spread across thousands of islands whose span could cover the distance from Iceland to Iraq, it's no surprise that identity—national, regional, ethnic, or religious—has long been a central preoccupation both for those studying the Indonesian national project, and those involved in its creation and maintenance. Benedict Anderson's (1972; 1983; 1990) foundational theories of national consciousness and nation-state formation drew heavily from his extensive research in Indonesia, particularly at a time when anxieties of national disintegration were harnessed and manipulated in service of horrific political violence (Anderson 1971). James Siegel (1998) and John Pemberton (1994) show how, under the New Order, the violence of 65-66 became a

permanent structure of Indonesian life, at once hidden and buried and visible in plain sight, producing both order and—particularly at the regime's end—disorder (Siegel 2006).

More recent work has highlighted processes of disjuncture and practices of resistance that have emerged throughout the archipelago in the post-*Reformasi* period following the nominal end of the New Order in 1998, and in some cases were there all along. Scholars like Tom Boellstorff (2005), Anna Tsing (2005), and Marina Welker (2014) have responded to Arjun Appadurai's (1996) call for an anthropology of global connection, showing how localized social practices interface and conflict with global forces and "flows" to produce new modernities, identities, and geographies transcending national boundaries. Tania Li (2014; 2007) and Nils Bubandt (2014) delve even deeper into these modernities, examining the emergent phenomena of socioeconomic relations and epistemological regimes created by those living at the margins of state and economic development. And in Eastern Indonesia, Danilyn Rutherford (2003; 2012) and Jenny Munro (2018) reveal the myriad contradictions and immense challenges experienced by Papuans strategically navigating ongoing internal colonialism and ambiguous sovereignty.

Especially relevant to this dissertation, anthropologists have become increasingly concerned with Indonesian practices of image-making, specifically how identities are cultivated and contested through representation of the self and the other, whether it's street art reclaiming space and rebuilding traditions of youth activism (Lee 2016) and public piety (Spyer 2021), preservation and promotion of cultural heritage for political resistance and economic resilience at the subnational level (Adams 2006; Howe 2005), or the role of photographs in constructing, deconstructing, and reconstructing national narratives (Strassler 2010; 2020).

An adjacent thread of analysis looks at how Indonesians represent, and often repress, memories of the past. Mary Steedly's research on the Karo of Sumatra demonstrates how

communal storytelling traditions critically preserve textured histories of local resistance from the erosion of dominant patriarchal and nationalist metanarratives (Steedly 2013a), and how collective engagement with the ghosts of trauma can offer communities a path forward (Steedly 1993). The latter theme is also taken up in the hauntological literature of the *Postcolonial Disorders* volume (Good et al. 2008), notably in exploring how phenomenological approaches to ethnography can attend to those aspects of memory and subjectivity which remain "unspeakable and unspoken… at the margins of formal speech and everyday presentations of self" (ibid., 14-15). Repressed or suppressed trauma can reemerge and manifest in surrealist imagery inspired by the "sickness" of the artist the state who mutually subjectify each other (Good and Good 2008), or as paranoid fantasies of pornographic blackmail weaponized by the ghost of a purportedly deceased regime whose authority nonetheless still survives, structuring the lives and imaginations of its subjects (MacDougall 2008).

Outside the academy however, in broader geopolitical or cultural discourses, Indonesia remains provincial. In a self-perpetuating cycle, Indonesia isn't recognized as a major global force, and therefore it isn't one. A similar recursive mechanism also operates within Indonesia. The term "inferiority complex" has been cited to me by countless Indonesians as the default explanation for any number of socioeconomic frustrations or contradictions.

"How can Indonesia make up nearly half the population of Southeast Asia, and yet Singapore, constituting less than 1%, is somehow more powerful and influential?"

"Why is Indonesia so rich in natural resources, and yet not rich in wealth?"

"How is it that Indonesia produces hundreds of films a year, and yet hardly anyone outside the country has ever seen one?"

It's that last one, or variations on it, which I've heard most often in the course of this research project, and which I usually turn back around on whoever asked it to me. "It's our inferiority complex", Angga once told me, repeating what I'd heard from so many Indonesians. As he put it, "we don't believe in our potential… so we don't take the risk, and if nobody takes the risk then you can't set a new bar". And without that new bar, he argues, it becomes harder yet for Indonesians to believe in their potential. People start to believe that perhaps they are simply lacking a fundamental quality that other cultures, particularly those of the wealthy Western nations, have in abundance. In the past I've sometimes felt an instinctual unease when hearing this. As a cultural relativist I fully reject the ideological premise of "inferiority", and yet I cannot deny the lived experience and phenomenological reality described to me by so many friends and interlocutors. And I'm also aware of the fact that many people who have had this feeling also recognize its hollowness and illegitimacy. Or as Frantz Fanon puts it in *Wretched of the Earth,* the colonial subject "is made to feel inferior, but by no means convinced of his inferiority" (2007:16).

Fanon, whose research in Algeria was foundational to developing the notion of a cultural inferiority complex—part of what he called the colonial mentality—theorized that it emerged in large part from the inherent dissonance of Western colonial powers violently imposing values onto colonized people which were fundamentally at odds with the material conditions brought about through exploitation and extraction. We can still see this dynamic playing out today, if we consider the obvious contradiction between the purported legitimizing importance of possessing a national cinema with international renown, and the challenge of actually developing and sustaining one in the mostly underdeveloped postcolonies of the Global South. To the question "why aren't Indonesian films appreciated by the rest of the world?", it's of course entirely

reasonable to respond with “why should they be?”. From a postcolonial and critical theory perspective, it’s easy to point out that the tastes of the global film audience have been shaped by U.S. cultural hegemony and economic/military domination, and that failing to adhere to those standards ought to be worn as a badge of honor. And yet, this is not the experience of most Indonesians I’ve met. Even A, a rare (for Indonesia) openly self-identifying Marxist-Leninist who worked on the crew of a film I followed, lamented the lack of recognition: “Where’s our Oscar? Where’s our *Parasite*?”

These discourses extend all the way to the national political stage. Joko Widodo (or Jokowi), soon to wrap up his consequential decade-long era as the President of Indonesia, has repeatedly referred to what he calls an “*inlander* mentality” (using the pejorative Dutch colonial term for the native population), causing Indonesians to cede improper reverence and deference to foreigners (Yuniar 2021). Former Jakarta governor and 2024 presidential candidate Anies Baswedan closed out the final debate of that campaign with the slogan "Indonesia absence no more, respected forever" (in English, no less). And to the point, Sandiaga Uno, Minister for Tourism and Creative Economy, has spoken on the importance of using cinema to “shape national identity, enhance national pride and showcase Indonesia’s beauty and richness on the global stage so that other countries won’t look down on us” (Nugroho 2024).

Perhaps precisely because they feel so unseen by the rest of the world, Indonesian filmmakers are very outward-looking. When I ask Indonesian filmmakers about their own favorite filmmakers they’ll very rarely name any from Indonesia, instead citing U.S. film school mainstays like Martin Scorsese or Paul Thomas Anderson, or sometimes regional icons from Hong Kong or South Korean cinema like Wong Kar-wai or Park Chan-wook. It’s those from latter category that produce not only admiration, but also a smidge of jealousy. Indonesians

constantly talk to me about "soft power", an elusive geopolitical trait purportedly achieved by the high-income "Asian Tigers" of Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan, who now exert their influence over the region not just economically, but culturally through their creative output. As members of the somewhat condescendingly named "Tiger Cub" economies of Southeast Asia, these Indonesians believe that growing their own regional influence can go hand in hand with developing economically, and that their failure to accomplish this reveals some immanent dysfunction in their culture or collective work ethic. It's in response to this attitude that my research aims to contribute.

Epic Fail

This dissertation is largely about failure in its many forms, particularly creative, academic, and personal. I feel moved to center this aspect, largely because failure has always been so compelling to me as a universal human experience. I can say with a high degree of confidence that there has never been a single person on this planet who did not at some point in their life attempt to do something ambitious, which they felt deeply and earnestly passionate about, only to fall completely flat on their face. Sometimes quite literally. How we respond to failure is of course much more particular. Our world is today completely saturated with inspirational quotes about failure as a teaching tool, failure as a non-permanent, failure as virtue, failure as a non-option, failure as a catalyst to pick oneself up and try again. One quote sticks out to me as particularly relevant.

One of the coffee shops (*warkop*) I frequented as a daily workspace while living in Jakarta—which like many others closed its doors permanently during the Covid-19 pandemic—was Kopi Aroma in the city's central Menteng district. As with many so-called "third wave"

coffee shops I've encountered—serving specialty drinks of increasing complexity and diversity using single-origin arabica beans and a wide array of brewing methods from V60 to cold drip—the cafe featured a peculiar mix of aesthetics seemingly pulled directly off Instagram. The hallway leading to the bathrooms was lined with posters of inspirational quotes from Apple founder Steve Jobs, the 1999 movie *Fight Club,* and Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist*. The latter has become something of a manifesto among young Indonesians for the power of positive thinking and belief in one's destiny. On the wall was its most famous quote:
"There is only one thing that makes a dream impossible to achieve: the fear of failure."

I stared at this poster many times while waiting for the restroom to free up, oscillating between finding its sentiment to be cloyingly obvious and almost nearly resonant. And then one day in 2020, Kopi Aroma was gone. The dream of its owner had become impossible. Not due to the fear of failure, but because an acute respiratory virus had circled the world, mutated in India, and evolved into a highly contagious variant that was now wreaking havoc on Indonesian life, and which could only be mitigated with social distancing. Cafes were now, at least in the foreseeable future, impossible.

So too was ethnographic fieldwork. It's impossible to write this dissertation without noting how its failure—and, eventually, success—was shaped by the pandemic, as so many were. In early 2020, I had just started what I believed at the time would be my primary ethnographic fieldwork: following the development of the Bumilangit Cinematic Universe (BCU), a highly ambitious planned slate of interconnected films and streaming TV series adapted from Indonesian superhero comic books. The first film in the series, *Gundala* (directed by BCU creative mastermind Joko Anwar) had come out in theaters just as I arrived in Jakarta in late 2019, and the production company behind the franchise (Screenplay Bumilangit) had already

announced the next six solo hero projects leading up to *Patriot* in 2025, an *Avengers*-style event film that would unite them all together. After making contact with Joko and Screenplay, I was given the go-ahead to observe production of the follow-up, *Sri Asih*, directed by Upi Avianto.

I'd been fascinated by the bold vision behind the franchise. To take what was (and still is) the most successful film genre in the world, thus far completely monopolized both financially and culturally by the United States, and localize it within Indonesian history, mythology, and society, seemed like a fascinating experiment in deprovincialization. As discussed briefly in Chapter 5, the filmmakers would need to take a concept so rooted in ideologies of American exceptionalism and techno-positivism and infuse it with Indonesian values and authentic lifeworlds, while also meeting the audience's expectations for spectacle with roughly 1/100th the production budget of a Marvel Studios film. It was riveting to witness the sheer audacity and refusal to settle for self-limitation. By hell or high water, the BCU was going to prove to local (and international) audiences that Indonesian cinema was ready for the spotlight.

By the first week of March 2020, I was spending each day at a gymnasium in Cempaka Putih in Central Jakarta, watching the film's star Pevita Pearce train and practice fight choreography with the stuntmen of Team Uwais, the legendary martial arts team almost single-handedly responsible for introducing the region's native *pencak silat* style into the global imaginary with *The Raid* (Gareth Evans, 2011). There were murmurs about the virus, but having endured many viral epidemics over the years, most notably SARS and H1N1, most of the film's cast and crew expressed little concern. Then, suddenly, everything changed. By the second week of March, it was clear that community transmission had occurred in Indonesia, and on March 11th the World Health Organization declared Covid-19 a global pandemic. The cast and crew of Sri Asih were told to stay home for the immediate future. I was asked by my grant organizations

to arrange return travel to the U.S. for my own safety, and to start considering ways of doing my research that did not involve in-person ethnography (as if this had not been drilled into my head for years as the very cornerstone of my discipline). So I left most my possessions in my Jakarta apartment and, for my safety, got on an international flight back to the United States, whose president had assured his citizens that the virus would "go away" within a month.

Sri Asih eventually started up production again later in 2020, with extensive Covid protocols in place. But several weeks into shooting, a number of crewmembers got sick, along with Pevita herself. The film shut down again, and did not wrap principle photography until April of 2021, nearly a year later than expected. Meanwhile, there was no way that Screenplay was going to release the film while most theaters were at half capacity or less, so the post-production process carried on for another year. The film was finally set for release in October of 2022. Then on October 3, just three days before the film was set to debut in theaters, director Upi Avianto announced that the film would be pushed forward to mid-November, apologizing to the fans and assuring them that this extra time was necessary to give them the quality film they deserved.

While not exactly a monster hit, *Gundala* had been modestly successful with 1.6 million tickets sold, putting it in the top ten most-watched Indonesian films of 2019. But the massive financial investment involved in the overall Bumilangit project, including building advanced visual effects infrastructure, holding some of the industry's top creative and acting talent on indefinite retainer, and increasing budgets with each successive film in order to keep audiences satisfied, demanded more than simply making a profit. If the plan was going to work, each film would need to outperform the last, gradually building trust with the audience. *Gundala*'s performance was just good enough to keep moving forward with *Sri Asih*, in the hopes that

Pevita's star appeal—and her 18 million followers on Instagram—would drive that film to even bigger heights, building exponential momentum.

But it was now more than three years since *Gundala* was released, and whatever cultural impact it had created was greatly diminished. *Sri Asih* opened to generally positive reviews, but the *hype*, that illusive and critical element of film marketing, simply wasn't there. After the first week's initial tally of 300,000 viewers, the official Instagram pages stopped giving updates, which is generally a sign that the number isn't increasing much higher. Eventually the film topped out at 500,000 viewers, less than a third of *Gundala*'s haul. Another big part of the *Sri Asih* strategy was to include a trailer for *Virgo and the Sparklings*, a high school superhero film targeted at a younger and potentially even larger audience, hoping that the momentum would assist that film too. It didn't. *Virgo and the Sparklings* opened a few months later in March 2023, and was seen by just over 50,000 people before it was unceremoniously removed from theaters after only one week.

While it's too soon to say the BCU franchise is moribund, as of 2024 its future is very much in doubt. Its roster of stars and filmmakers have moved on to new projects, and more crucially there is little investment enthusiasm for the expensive productions. There's many reasons one can give for this failure. The most obvious is Covid-19, a massive disruption both for Screenplay's production calendar, as it was for the global film industry. But while much of the American film industry had already been captured by the deep pockets of Big Tech and private equity and could therefore weather the storm, Indonesian film companies like Screenplay, with such narrow profit margins, don't have the same luxury. There are no tax loopholes like those used by Warner Bros. to benefit more from permanently "shelving" fully finished films like the $90 million dollar *Batgirl* or the $70 million dollar Looney Tunes spinoff *Coyote vs*.

Acme rather than risk releasing them to underwhelming box office returns. In Indonesia, even a million dollar loss can scare investors away from a filmmaker or an entire genre.

Which brings me to my point. Due to the expenses involved, film has always been an inherently risky and failure-prone medium to produce. For poorer countries like Indonesia, this has resulted in a century of boom-and-bust cycles, rapid onsets of a new "golden age" followed by near-total collapse. Failure has been experienced on both a macro scale, on an industry-wide level, and also a micro scale, with a long history of costly experiments attempting to break new ground. This can happen on a commercial level as it did with the BCU and similar attempts to revive or reinvent the Indonesian action film, such as the historical silat film *The Golden Cane Warrior* (Ifa Isfansyah, 2014) or the English-language hypermasculine sci-fi action epic *Foxtrot Six* (Randy Korompis, 2019), both of which lost millions of dollars for their producers. And it also regularly happens with more arthouse-leaning films, like the international festival favorite and top winner at JAFF, the dark treatise on masculinity *Autobiography* (Makbul Mubarak, 2022), which received 33,407 admissions in its theatrical run.

In their book *Failure*, Arjun Appadurai and Neta Alexander posit that failure is not "a self-evident property or quality of projects, institutions, technologies, or lives. Rather, it is a product of judgments that reflect various arrangements of power, competence, and equity in different places and times" (2019:1). The twin financializing neoliberal forces of Silicon Valley and Wall Street have, they argue, produced "regimes of failure" in which it becomes accepted that certain things are too big to fail, while others are built to fail. Returning to the previous section on cultural inferiority, I argue that the answer to many of the questions I receive from Indonesians about why they're not richer, why they're not more visible, and why their films aren't living up to their own expectations or that of world, have less to do with who Indonesians

are, and more to do with these regimes, “in which a certain epistemology, political economy, and dominant technology come together to naturalize and limit potential judgments about failure” (ibid.:2). In other words, there is nothing natural about the failure that so many Indonesian filmmakers have experienced, and which I illustrate in this dissertation through my own experience with *Ubudians*.

As of August 2024, it's a bit premature to objectively deem *Ubudians* a "failure", given that it has yet to be completed, let alone released to elicit audience feedback (the traditional metric for qualifying "success" in mass visual entertainment). But given that more than two years on, the project once described by my Visinema co-producers as a "slam dunk" remains in an indefinite state of endless rewrites and existential uncertainty known in Hollywood as "development hell", it's not a stretch to suggest that something has gone astray. More to the point, the question of whether or not *Ubudians* "failed" is itself central to this dissertation. Given that judgment of failure depends largely on what was promised in the first place, this dissertation will spend its first half detailing the promise of *Ubudians*, and the second half describing how and whether we lived up to it.

Indonesian Film Studies in Three Phases

This dissertation builds on a rich body of scholarship on Indonesian films and filmmaking that has grown steadily over the last several decades. Until the 1980s, the academic study of Indonesian film was almost non-existent outside of the writing of a few Indonesian critics and filmmakers. Today however, there is a small but thoroughly detailed body of work examining the historical development, thematic and aesthetic characteristics, and contemporary political economy of Indonesian cinema. Most scholars divide the history of Indonesia into three

distinct eras, which more or less align with the three major sociopolitical shifts of the 20th century. The scholarship I draw on can also be conveniently grouped into these three eras.

The first is the Independence era, from the 1920s up until 1966. Some scholars choose to delineate the years following independence in 1947 as the beginning of Indonesian cinema, and particularly Usmar Ismail's 1950 film *Darah Dan Doa*, the first film produced entirely by a *pribumi* (native) Indonesian filmmaker. Given the extensive history of ethnic Chinese film producers dating back to the 1920s, as we'll explore in the final chapter, this distinction is controversial. Thankfully, valuable recent studies have re-excavated the crucial role of these producers (Sen 2006; Setijadi and Barker 2010) as well as colonial era cinema (Ruppin 2016; Ray 2021) in developing the industry, and their still enduring impact. My knowledge of this early period relies heavily on the work of Indonesian film historians like Salim Said (1991) and Misbach Yusa Biran (1993). The ideology of these historians, and of many of the films they wrote about, reflect what Thomas Barker has called *film nasional*, the idealistic belief in cinema as "an extension of nationalism in both economic and cultural terms", inspiring a mission to encourage audiences to reject the "vulgar" commercial and foreign films of the era (2020:6). As we'll see, this conflict is still playing out today.

The second era is the New Order period from 1966 to 1998. By the 1980s, foreign scholars of Indonesian cinema were incorporating fieldwork into their research, allowing for increased engagement with filmmakers in the country and therefore a deeper and richer analysis of the industry. Krishna Sen's *Indonesian Cinema: Framing the New Order* (1994) and Karl Heider's *Indonesian Cinema: National Culture on Screen* (1991) were both foundational studies and remain some of best source of documentation and analysis for this era, along with later work from David Hanan (2017; 2021) and Ekky Imanjaya (2016). A strong narrative thread of

oppression and resistance, as well as order and disorder, runs through this literature, illustrating how the censorial constraints of the Suharto regime driven by an imperative to aggressively consolidate and control the unruly nation both limited and produced forms of creative expression. Worth adding here are Klarijn Loven's (2014) Philip Kitley's (2014) essential studies on the dominance of Indonesian television in the 1990s, and Merlyna Lim's (2003) work on internet cafes during the same era, as catalysts both for the total collapse of the film industry at the turn of the millennium, as well as the political shifts that would lead to its rebirth.

Lastly, the contemporary era (sometimes referred to as post-Reformasi) from 1998 to the present has been marked by an ever growing range of scholarship from a multitude of countries, in disciplines from cinema studies to Asian studies to Islam studies to gender studies. Three key texts which explore the current political economy and social dynamics of the Indonesian film industry today are Katinka van Heeren's *Contemporary Indonesian Film* (2012), Ariel Heryanto's *Identity and Pleasure* (2014), and Thomas Barker's *Indonesian Cinema After the New Order* (2020) all of which involved interviews with many of the same filmmakers I encountered personally or through their creative output in my fieldwork. These accounts share a mix of exuberance over the creative potentials for a reawakened national cinema infused with an indie spirit, with gradually tempered expectations as the industry reconsolidated into an oligarchic structure and the rise of dominant Muslim popular culture (Daniels 2013) created new limits for creative expression. Writing from this period reflects the uneasy ambiguity of contemporary Indonesian society and film culture, in the constant push-and-pull of remembering and forgetting (Steedly 2013b) or the construction and deconstruction of gender identities (Izharuddin 2016; Murtagh 2013). Lastly, Ari Purnama's recent book *Film Style in Indonesian Cinema* (2023)

offers the first in-depth aesthetic analysis of Indonesian film, which I found highly useful in reflecting on the stylistic challenges and disputes involved in envisioning *Ubudians*.

I am indebted to the scholarship put out by these authors, without whom my understanding of the Indonesian film industry, and of Indonesia more broadly, would be severely diminished. And while many of these incorporate some degree of fieldwork and participant observation, to my knowledge there has not yet been extensive ethnographic research conducted by anthropologists within the commercial Indonesian film industry. Therefore my contribution to this body of literature is, at the most basic level, reflective of what anthropology as a discipline still offers to academia, namely the depth and richness of description that emerged from long-term ethnographic engagement. More specifically, and perhaps novel for anthropology both in the experience described and in the ethical and methodological questions raised as a result, is the element of my own position as the primary creative voice in the development of this project. I turn to these questions in the next section.

A Method in the Loose Sense of the Term

As previously mentioned, my dissertation design emerged in large part from failure. My original research project on Indonesian superhero films fell apart due to the pandemic. But that same pandemic also resulted in my introduction to Angga Sasongko, and to what I then believed to be my research project, a year of observation of Visinema's film projects. It was in doing so that I accumulated the most ethnographic data in the traditional sense of interviews and on-set observation. But it was also how I ended up in a producing role myself, leading to yet another year and another (now final, *insya'allah*) research project. Most of that original data has now become background to this story, though I have made an effort to sprinkle insights from that

period throughout this dissertation wherever possible. But the bulk of this text comes from a first-person perspective, which requires some explanation.

Truth be told, the prospect of inserting myself into my ethnography was always something I always felt uncomfortable with, but also seemed somewhat inevitable. I was born in 1986, the same year that the *Writing Culture* debate began to transform the practice of ethnographic research and writing, calling for a more critical perspective on ethnographic authority and greater self-reflection on the anthropologist's subjectivity and positionality among their interlocutors (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Marcus and Fischer 1986). And while the exact contours of that debate were not known to me until I took Mary Steedly's proseminar my first year at Harvard, the immediate resonance I felt upon reading the relevant literature couldn't help but make me feel as if I had grown up in a world shaped by it, and had simply been looking for the language to articulate what I had long been struggling internally with.

Before I started my Ph.D., I had set my sights on working as an international documentary photographer. I'd spent years making images in Vietnam, Cambodia, Nepal, Haiti, and Indonesia. I'd visited mountaintop monasteries, leprosy colonies, stilt house villages, and squatter camps. Routinely, people invited me into their homes and into their lives under no premise beyond my genuine curiosity and motivation to share the story of their lives with others. Nothing about this practice seemed particularly exploitative or unethical until I started trying to figure out how I could make a career out of it. After all, if you love doing something, why not do it as an occupation? Famous last words.

As soon as that genuine curiosity became inflected with ambition, I immediately started feeling different about my relationship with the subjects of my photos. I was no longer making images, I was *taking* them. And no amount of self-talk about the importance of "raising

awareness" or "increasing visibility" could overcome my suspicion that this had become an extractive enterprise. Almost all the labor involved in the imagery of those photos, the built environments and communities that drew my interest, came from people who would largely not benefit as a result. Because I had means of studying photography, buying a camera, and traveling to these destinations, I could now profit off the sheer existence of *others,* of whose lives I had very little comprehensive understanding. I'd hoped that pursuing a doctorate in sociocultural anthropology could help legitimize my interest and stop the downward spiral of self-doubt and self-criticism. Of course I quickly realized that anthropology is—for better and worse—one of the most exhaustively self-critical fields in all of academia, both due to its necessary reevaluation of its complicity in the history of racism, colonialism and empire, but also the inherent existential angst that arises from socially-constructed beings studying the nature of social construction. Other fields such as psychology and sociology take humans as their primary object of study, but none seem quite so agonized over the implications of this as anthropologists do.

So I was very much at home. And while it was initially demoralizing to learn that the discipline has yet to definitively resolve its inherent contradictions (as this is likely impossible), and that I would have no choice to "stay with the trouble" of my own positionality as a white man and a U.S. citizen with enormous privilege, I did nonetheless gain a wide range of tools to problematize and put it to work. And it's in that spirit that found myself turning to autoethnography as a methodology. In the first week of that same proseminar with Mary Steedly, we were asked to read together Bronisław Malinowski's *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1984) and his concurrent *A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term* (1989). At the time, I remember feeling—as many did at the time of its publication—mostly contempt and secondhand embarrassment for Malinowski's egocentrism, and vowed to never let myself become that type

of anthropologist. But in reading James Clifford's reevaluation of his legacy, I realized that I also did not want the inevitable messiness of my own ethnographic research to be, as he puts it, "torn off, as it were, to construct a public, believable discourse" (1988:112). Of course, I am not brave enough to offer a full unvarnished account of my inner thought processes, nor do I think anyone should. But I do aim to produce an honest account of the intersubjective tensions and confusions that emerged both unintentionally and intentionally as a result of my role in this project.

If Susan Sontag saw in Claude Levi-Strauss the potential for "the anthropologist as hero" (1966:81), standing watch over a citadel containing all known possibilities for social forms and systems, I instead see my position in this narrative more resembling the anthropologist as *antagonist*. That's not to be confused with being a villain. Intensely self-critical as I may be, I don't make any claim that either my intentions or impact in my field sites were remotely malevolent. And yet, both could fairly be described as *disruptive*. My intent, at least in part, was to alter my object of study (the Indonesian film industry). I don't mean that in the same sense that many anthropologists have since the so-called "reflexive turn" increasingly acknowledged the observer effect and the inevitability of influencing their research environments and interlocutors, and consequently leaned into this problem by critically reflecting on those effects (Rabinow 2007). In my case I went quite a bit further, with my influence not simply being an unavoidable but useful byproduct to my primary study, but rather a central component of it.

I had already spent two years observing Indonesian filmmakers and hearing them repeatedly express frustrations over their relationships with the international film world, with their own audiences, and with the constrictive realities of capitalism in the Global South. There were things they wanted to change, to experiment with, to introduce to audiences and convince other filmmakers to try for themselves. I was given an opportunity to do that myself, and—after

some initial hesitation—I took it. In this way, my research methodology moves beyond participant observation into the realm of what Malefyt and Morais call “observant participation”, which they argue goes “beyond just producing knowledge of another’s way of life”, but also produces “a sense of the self *as the other*” (2012:5). My own subjectivity profoundly shaped the contours of this project, and revealed the limits of my own habitus (Bourdieu 2013), as well as that of my creative partners, in navigating the shared field we were consciously attempting to co-create.

But this is also where things get a little dicey. Aside from my obvious interest in film, a major part of my motivation for researching in the industry stemmed from an interest in "studying up" (Nader 1972). After my years as a documentary photographer, I no longer wanted to engage in observation of a small sea village or similarly marginalized community. I felt that looking at urban elites would provide some semblance of equivalence in power dynamics. This is of course more complicated in practice, as the vast majority of film and television workers are not "elites" in any sense of the word, as Vicki Mayer illustrates in her study of TV production, *Below the Line* (2011). And like Mayer, I repeatedly encountered the inherent messiness and “fucking up”, as I found myself navigating the complicated dual roles of observer and participant, employee and supervisor, “user” and “used” (2008:145).

It’s important to disclose here that, as an executive producer and showrunner of Ubudians, I was compensated for a year of work, with Angga and I agreeing on a salary that was more or less commensurate with the going industry rate. I felt uneasy about this, given that I was already receiving a lot of value by gaining access to this research subject. But I’d already used up my grant money over nearly two years of quarantine, and I also felt that valuing my own labor

and treating this as a “real job” (and not simply an experiential apprenticeship) would ensure that I gave as much of myself as possible to the project, which I did.

This research oddly finds itself in a space between the fields of business anthropology and corporate anthropology, neither of which I'd ever intended to contribute to. The former examines business and institutional culture for academic insight , while the latter employs anthropological theory and methods in service of a company's financial interests (McCracken 2009). In my case, as an observer of Visinema Pictures and an employee invested in their mission, I was essentially doing both. While this felt like uneasy ethical terrain, I drew inspiration from Karen Ho's ethnography *Liquidated*, based on her time working in a Wall Street investment firm and largely drawing from a "journal of personal reflections and experiences, taking care not to describe in detail the thoughts and actions of my coworkers and friends who—although they knew of my research interests—were ‘on the job.’" (2009:14). I took a similar approach to gathering data, and while I did get consent to include my interlocuters’ on the job thoughts, I’ve used discretion in generalizing or anonymizing any comments that might cause them professional or personal harm.

Dimensions of the Imaginary

One final disciplinary question I pose with this project evaluates the utility of anthropological and social theory in the development of creative media. The history of anthropology is fully enmeshed with the advancement of photographic technologies, and film in particular. And while visual anthropology is ostensibly meant to be a representative document of reality, anyone with even a cursory knowledge of its history understands that this distinction has been a murky one from the start. Starting with *Nanook of the North* (1922), the films of Robert J.

Flaherty were foundational both for cultivating a visual representation of indigenous people in the popular imaginary of North America and Europe, and also for establishing ethnographic film as a genre[1].

And while Flaherty's staging of certain scenes to properly capture Nanook's daily practices has generated a debate over objectivity and realism in filmmaking that persists more than a century later in introductory documentary film classes, his follow-up feature *Moana* (1926) went even further by manufacturing a version of Samoan life and customs that had long since disappeared by the time he arrived there. Ironically, it's the latter film that is credited with the first cinematic application of the term "documentary", in a review from the Scottish John Grierson, who defined it as “the creative treatment of actuality” (Marcus 2009), though its usage of nonprofessional actors to dramatize their own world has also sometimes been referred to as "docufiction". As further explored in Chapter 2, the ethnographic film and docufiction genres soon found a highly conducive environment in the nascent tourist locale of Bali, and particularly the village of Ubud, whose lush landscapes and vibrant ceremonies proved irresistible to a Western gaze increasingly fascinated by encounters with the Orientalized other.

It was anthropologist and filmmaker Jean Rouch who took the experiment of blending ethnography and storytelling even further with his "ethnofictions", a series of largely improvisational films produced in collaboration with interlocutors from his West African field sites. In films like *Jaguar* (1955), *Moi, un noir* (1958), and *La Pyramide humaine* (1961), Rouch engaged in a process he called “shared anthropology”, wherein the ethnographer is no longer just an observer, but “has become a stimulator of mutual awareness (hence dignity)”, and whose

[1] Worth mentioning here is Edward S. Curtis's *In the Land of the Head Hunters* (1914), which took a similar approach in its depiction of the Kwakwaka'wakw people. However, the film was a commercial failure and did not have a significant cultural impact until it was rediscovered decades later.

output “is judged not by a thesis committee but by the very people the anthropologist went out to observe” (Rouch 2003:44). Rouch felt strongly that “this type of totally participatory research, as idealistic as it may seem” was “the only morally and scientifically feasible anthropological attitude today” (ibid.), and while I wouldn’t go as far as him, I would simply argue that it is at the very minimum morally and scientifically valid, and ought to be viewed more widely as such in the discipline.

Highly influenced by the *ciné-eye* theories of filmic truth posed by foundational Russian filmmaker Dziga Vertov, Rouch believed in a state of *ciné-trance*, a collaboration with the film apparatus in which the filmmaker walks "with the camera, taking it where it is most effective and improvising another type of ballet with it" (2003:38). This could then act as a catalyst, drawing in the other participants, the actors and the crew, into “a strange kind of choreography” (ibid.:99). My question with *Ubudians* was, could this same orientation be applied to the process of collaborative screenwriting, long before any cameras are involved? Given the inherent intentionality required for writing a 10-hour dramatic narrative, one wouldn't normally apply analogies of spirit possession. And yet, anyone who's ever created art, or studied those who do, can understand the sensation of "channeling" something into existence which feels like it was already waiting, *a priori*, to be excavated. This too can feel like possession, and when involving multiple people, the collaborative act of dreaming can resemble a ballet, or in more discordant moments, capoeira.

Rouch was also inspired, as I am, by the history of surrealism. He cited many of its originators, including André Breton, Michel Leiris, and Paul Éluard, as his “totemic ancestors”, over and above any anthropologists (Rouch 2003:131). It’s not surprising that the two disciplines have such a significant historical overlap. James Clifford , who defines surrealism as “an

aesthetic that values fragments, curious collections, unexpected juxtapositions—that works to provoke the manifestation of extraordinary realities drawn from the domains of the erotic, the exotic, and the unconscious" (1988:118) traces its genealogy and that of ethnography to a shared belief "that the other (whether accessible in dreams, fetishes, or Levy-Bruhl's *mentalite primitive)* was a crucial object of modern research" (ibid.:120). Surrealism in this sense is not only an aesthetic, but also a practice, and an attitude. By destabilizing traditional logic and modernist obsession with rigid categorization, it opens up the possibility "to see culture and its norms—beauty, truth, reality—as artificial arrangements susceptible to detached analysis and comparison with other possible dispositions" (ibid.:119). This too has always been to me the greatest value of ethnography, and would play a critical role in the development of *Ubudians,* as discussed in Chapter 3 and 4.

I want to be clear, however, that *Ubudians* was not intended to reproduce Rouch's ethnofiction formula. For one thing, Rouch never established a formula to be reproduced, actively rejecting such a notion by arguing that "if there is a theory, there are no longer improvisation and creativity" (Yakir and Rouch 1978:10). But there are still notable and consequential differences in our methods. With *Ubudians*, the actors would not be playing themselves, nor would they be writing their own dialogue. Rouch claimed that in "working with people who are champions of the oral tradition, it's impossible to write scenarios, impossible to write dialogues" (2003:149), and regardless of whether this was true for his interlocuters in the 1950s, the same cannot be said for the Indonesian film industry. Instead, my writers and myself would be co-imagining others, built out of our individual experiences, shared imagination, and collaborative understanding of Indonesian culture as both insiders and outsiders.

But perhaps most problematic at all, even more so than my own position of authority as a foreign creator and showrunner, is the degree to which the *Ubudians* project as commercial entertainment was bound up and implicated within capitalist structures and logic. And this returns to the central dilemma of this dissertation. One might reasonably ask, why not simply gather a few friends, get a camera, and do an independent ethnofiction together, just like Rouch? My only answer is that I recognize hardly anyone would ever see it. Either way, popular culture is going to exist as a site of struggle (Hall 2018), so why not intervene there? Like the Indonesian filmmakers mentioned above, I believe (perhaps too idealistically) in the possibility of a popular cinema (or television) that also grounds itself in lived experience, ethnographic observation, and sociopolitical context, which explores difficult and even painful questions, sometimes directly and sometimes through metaphor or surrealist anti-logic, but does all this while also forcing you to laugh, cry, and scream. In other words, I believe in the possibility of middle cinema.

As Rouch himself wrote: "fiction is the only way to penetrate reality—the means of sociology remain exterior ones… I could have made a documentary full of figures and observations. That would have been deathly boring. So I told a story with characters, their adventures and their dreams." (Eaton 1979:8).

The Shape of Things to Come

This dissertation is essentially structured into two parts, each consisting of three chapters. The first half establishes the background and inspiration behind *Ubudians,* while the second half explores each of the three oppositional tensions mentioned at the beginning of this introduction.

The first chapter, which I've called a prologue, details how the concept of *Ubudians* first came into being, starting with my relationship with Angga Sasongko and his motivations for

putting me in charge of running the show. Angga was not simply my "way in" to this project, but was (and remains) an inspirational figure to me as someone who continues to push Indonesian cinema to its limits, and refuses to accept any limitations on his dreams that others might assume are inevitable. I also outline how I infused the project with my own anthropological concerns, and Angga's response as I pitched the material to him.

Given the centrality of Ubud and Balinese culture to the story and themes of the show Chapter 2 then shifts into a historical analysis of how Bali first entered the global imaginary through the development of a cinematic Orientalizing gaze. Much of what is today known as "Balinese culture" was cultivated as part of—and in response to—colonial and nationalist projects and the growth of the tourism industry, intersecting at key moments with the history of film and anthropology. Finally, I reflect on my own fieldwork in Bali prior to the show's development, and how a recent public backlash against mass tourism informed the social commentary that would be threaded into the narrative of *Ubudians*.

In Chapter 3, I describe the initial stages of developing Ubudians once I'd been given the greenlight and placed into the role of showrunner. The first step involved assembling the creative team of Indonesians that would be charged with writing and directing the series. It was clear from the beginning that our show needed to break several molds—narrative, thematic, and aesthetic—and this would only be possible with the right kind of visionaries, and the process of seeking them out would illustrate some of the challenges I'd long heard about while conducting my preliminary fieldwork on film sets. Once recruited, the writing team then meets for the first time together at a story bootcamp in Semarang, where initial disagreements and conflicts start to reveal the three major tensions that would come to shape the project.

The second half shifts further into autoethnographic mode as I, along with the writing team and producers, navigate each of these tensions. First, Chapter 4 looks at the friction between the global and the local, as disconnects start to emerge between my own expectations and the reality of the emerging script drafts. I had believed that my years of experience researching Indonesian culture and history, and the writers' own experience within the world of Ubud, would be sufficient enough for us each to transcend our own habitus and smoothly integrate into a creative collaboration. Instead, there were constant struggles for myself and my writers to appreciate or even understand each others' taste and creative calls, and I began to realize that the realities of their economic precarity created a major barrier to their emotional investment in the practice of shared dreaming I'd imagined.

Chapter 5 involves the friction between the producer and their audience. After struggling for months to pull things back in the direction I felt we needed to go, I was tasked with pitching the show to several regional subsidiaries of global streaming giants (Netflix, Amazon, Disney). Though I had gone into the meetings feeling extremely confident, I instead left completely deflated. The concern expressed to me repeatedly, which would end up fundamentally altering the trajectory of the show's development, was "who is the audience for this?". My own and Visinema's calculation of the show's appeal seemed to be distorted, and did not adequately factor in the streamers' corporate strategies. In the fight to claim the middle space, I had believed that the show was moving too far into the mainstream end and needed to be pulled back, when in fact it actually needed to pushed even further away, and it was my own distorted Overton window preventing that from happening.

The final chapter takes on what is perhaps the oldest and most critical friction in filmmaking and of creative production more broadly, between art and commerce. Film is a

commodity, and unless one happens to be a multimillionaire, or has one as a benefactor, the costs of film production must be balanced with potential earnings to ensure profit. As the development dragged into its second year, the realities of budgeting started to impact not only how the show could look and sound, but what kinds of stories we could even tell. Key episodes, storylines, and themes were removed due to their "non-essentiality" to the main plot, crucial roles for foreigners or Chinese-Indonesians were cut or recast as Javanese, the overall scope and ambition of the series reduced to near-absence. Our dream, modest as it was compared to superheroes or supernatural horror, was simply too expensive to take a risk on.

Chapter 1: Prologue

This chapter briefly outlines the original conception of the Bali-set streaming series *Ubudians*, which I was hired to create and executive produce for Visinema Pictures. I first detail my relationship with CEO/filmmaker Angga Sasongko and his initial motivations for wanting to make the show, and for asking me to advise him on it. I then detail the thematic and stylistic inspiration I drew from to develop the premise, as well as my fears and hopes about taking a more central role in the project, finally finishing with my pitch to Angga at Visinema HQ.

Hatching a Plan

From the very start of my journey toward writing a dissertation on Indonesian cinema, I'd hoped for the opportunity to follow the entire lifecycle of a film from its writing phase through to its release. I'd been inspired by previous ethnographies like Lotte Hoek's *Cut Pieces* (2013), which had taken this approach with the Bangladeshi B-movie thriller *Mintu the Murderer*, and effectively illustrated how a single film can become a social world, creating or solidifying tangled networks of actors who transform and are transformed by it as it passes through them. Equally formative was Anand Pandian's *Reel World* (2015), which took something of an opposite approach, deconstructing the entire film process into its constituent elements (sound, picture, script) and then rearranging them like a film editor creating montage, revealing the contingencies which act upon film production in ways that can seem at one moment like chaos and another like divine intervention.

With Angga Sasongko, I'd found a way to incorporate both approaches. Not only was I able to observe the entire development and production of his 2022 heist film *Mencuri Raden Saleh* from script to screen, I also gained access to the larger structure of the company, allowing

a more freeform exploration of its various teams and players, from business to story to marketing, all intersecting with each other at different stages of their individual projects. What I did not and could not have planned for was the possibility that I would find myself working directly with Visinema on a project of my own. But looking back now with the benefit of hindsight, perhaps I shouldn't have been as surprised as I was.

I first met Angga in March of 2021, and we seemed to hit it off immediately. Some filmmakers (this goes for Indonesia and the U.S.) are actually quite shy and not eager to discuss their own work, let alone the industry more broadly. Angga couldn't be more the opposite. I'd already seen him in several interviews, so I knew he liked to talk. But I still wasn't prepared for the wide-ranging breadth of our first conversation at Visinema HQ in Cilandak in South Jakarta. In two hours, we covered Angga's relationship with Christianity and how it informs his approach to filmmaking in a majority Muslim nation; the critical role of South Korean soap operas in the development of that nation's dominant cultural influence and "soft power" in Southeast Asia; Indonesia's paradoxical hyper-ambitious and under-confident disposition toward the rest of the world; and reckoning with the uncomfortable and dark truths that lay buried under the self-presentation of an individual or a group of people. Not only was he interested in my research, but he could see the direct benefit to having a social scientist examine his company's creative culture and reflect on it from an outside perspective. Given my tendency toward feeling like I'm a burden or intruder into the lives of those I'm researching, this symbiosis put me at ease.

We also covered a lot of business topics, regarding the impact of streaming on the industry, the oligopolistic character of theatrical exhibition (See Barker 2020:143–151), and the increased importance of developing intellectual property (IP), even if it meant trawling Twitter

for viral ghost stories to adapt to film[2]. As a filmmaker and a CEO, Angga wears two very large hats and it's often hard to know which one fits him better. When he talks about business, he carries himself like a natural-born tech entrepreneur, projecting immense confidence while tossing out Silicon Valley buzzwords like "digital ecosystems", "VC burn rate", and "series A financing". He regularly appears on podcasts and talk shows whose other guests are key business figures like service app Gojek founder Nadiem Makarim and Finance Minister Sri Mulyani.

At the same time, he's often expressed that his primary desire was always to make films, and that the impulse to build a company mostly came from wanting to be independent of the demands he'd faced working within the established structures of the industry. Referring to a certain major Indonesian film studio whose name I promised not to repeat (though this could easily describe most of them), Angga told me "they just want to make fast profit, and they don't care how. In fact, they don't even care how much. They'll settle for fast and low profit, over a bit slower and high profit, every time". The difference with Visinema? "We want to make profit too, we just care about how we do it".

Given how rare it is for film directors to end up in positions where they can dictate financial decisions, Angga seems to feel an obligation to innovate in whatever way he can. And it was for this reason—and not simply the warm welcome—that Visinema became the perfect field site for my research. I wanted to know how Indonesian film could break new ground, and Angga was driven by the same question. Creatively, this meant producing bold, often costly experiments in locally underexplored genres like 3D animation (*Nussa*, Bony Wirasmono, 2021) and dystopian sci-fi (*24 Jam Bersama Gasper,* Anggi Yosep Noen, 2024). Technically, it meant

[2] This isn't a trivial matter. The current highest grossing film in Indonesian history, *KKN di Desa Penari* (Awi Suryadi, 2022), as well as the ninth-highest *Sewu Dino* (Kimo Stamboel, 2023), were both adapted from ghost stories first shared as viral Twitter threads by user SimpleMan.

pushing the limits of Indonesian stunt work, special effects, and cinematography on his crime thrillers *Mencuri Raden Saleh* (2022) and *13 Bom di Jakarta* (2023). Financially, it meant developing a film fund structure of numerous wealthy investors, and launching a streaming film platform, Bioskop Online. And lastly, it meant identifying and tapping less experienced creatives to produce new projects, which is also how I ended up getting involved.

After that first meeting in Jakarta, he'd invited me to attend a series of script workshops with his creative team at a luxury rental villa in Canggu, Bali, developing the script for *Mencuri Raden Saleh*. Given how grateful I was to even have this opportunity to begin with, I'd only intended to sit there quietly in the background and observe and take notes as they stood around whiteboards drawing vast and complex story diagrams, but Angga had other ideas. In moments of pause, when it seemed like they'd hit a wall, Angga would turn to me and ask for my opinion about the logic of Piko's initial motivation for agreeing to forge a replica of the iconic Raden Saleh painting, or whether the ending twist with his father felt satisfying enough as a payoff. In these moments he'd also abruptly switch from Indonesian to English.

While Angga knew I could speak Indonesian, and could probably express himself better in it, he'd often use English with me, partly as a courtesy, a way of making me feel more comfortable and welcome. But I could tell it also reaffirmed a sense of pride in his ability to converse with foreigners. Angga was never the most studious youth, and unlike many people at his level of success, he didn't attend international schools or top universities. But he was driven to learn filmmaking in any way he could, picking up concepts like a sponge from his friends, relatives, books, or Youtube videos. This is also how he acquired English over time, despite having never taken formal classes, something he felt especially proud of considering that many of his peers had opportunities to study at international schools or even abroad in Australia or the

United States. I realized later that this was also a large factor in his decision, along with his wife and producing partner Anggia Kharisma (head of Visinema's family programming division) to raise their son Angkasa Rigel as a bilingual native English speaker. Angga didn't care what Angkasa ended up doing with that skill, he just recognized that the life paths available to him would be expanded multifold, and didn't want to put any limit on his dreams (a running theme for Angga).

This code-switching was a bit jarring at first. I normally tried to do my best to follow the chaotic back-and-forth in rapid Indonesian between Angga and his producing partners, but often I'd get drawn into my own thoughts and focus on writing down observations or ideas in my notebook, when suddenly Angga's voice would cut through the air in English: "what do you think, as our expert?". "Expert in what?", I'd respond half-joking, partly as a deflection from the fact that I had completely lost the (literal) plot, not knowing which character or story beat we had arrived at that I was expected to have an opinion on, but also as a genuine expression of surprise that I was being considered as someone that had anything to offer. This feeling of imposter syndrome came to me often in my early days of research in the industry. After all, everyone I was speaking with had far more experience in the film industry—not just in Indonesia, but *anywhere*—than I did.

I was often concerned that I was being offered a level of credibility that I hadn't quite earned, based on a mistaken belief that a Ph.D. candidate from a renowned university must definitionally be an *expert* in whatever it is they're researching. I'm very conscious of the fact that the word 'Harvard' has opened doors for me in Indonesia that would be much less readily accessible to a native anthropologist, and while I had no scruples about using this to my

advantage on numerous occasions, it did produce an insecurity in me that I might not actually possess the acuity or knowledge to live up to this expectation.

But as Angga repeatedly reminded me, the fact that I had previously studied film at an American university, while by no means a guarantor of useful insight into filmmaking, had provided me with a level of formal training in production and theory that was rare in Indonesia and worth having around, especially as it didn't cost them anything. I also tried to keep in mind that others can tell when you've spent a lifetime as a film industry obsessive. By the age of 11, I could be found sitting on the floor of the magazine aisle of Borders Bookstore reading the latest issue *The Hollywood Reporter* or *American Cinematographer*. By 14, I was submitting scoops to, and conducting email-based celebrity interviews for, websites in the nascent movie news blogosphere, posing under a pseudonym as a much-older college student. I didn't reveal this to my parents at the time, and had no friends that shared my interest. With a first job at a video rental store to top it off, I was the prototypical early aughts internet movie nerd, and more than two decades later this accumulated knowledge was finally being put to work.

Which brings us to March 2022, a few months after the end of shooting *Mencuri Raden Saleh*. I wasn't planning on following Angga's next film, a time-jumping sequel-prequel to his 2020 intergenerational family drama (and surprise pandemic hit) *Nanti Kita Cerita tentang Hari Ini (One Day We'll Talk About Today).* But he was shooting for a few days in the Balinese city of Ubud, and I happened to be there at the same time, doing some side research on the recent influx of Russian and Ukrainian expats fleeing the conflict in Eastern Ukraine. So I stopped by the set, eager to reconnect with Angga and much of the same crew I'd gotten to know on *Mencuri Raden Saleh.* At one point, on a break between shot set-ups, Angga pulled me aside, telling me he'd

come up with a new concept for a streaming TV series he wanted Visinema to produce in Ubud, and wanted to hear my thoughts.

The premise was simple, but seemed to hold the potential for a lot of fresh and relatable themes for Indonesians. A young power couple from Jakarta, years into their marriage, have now hit their mid-30s and still don't have children (a true crisis in Indonesian life if ever there was one), and are starting to grow apart. After they make a huge windfall by selling their startup company, they relocate to Bali, hoping that the "medicine"[3] of Ubud will help them fix their marriage and start a family. Along the way, they encounter all the strange, wild characters of both foreign and Indonesian origin that inhabit this spiritual tourist destination, known colloquially as Ubudians (ironically, this term is not normally used to describe actual native denizens of Ubud, unless they've already become enmeshed in the spiritual "scene"). The resulting show—also called *Ubudians*—would generate comedy, drama, and romance, checking off all the major Indonesian genre boxes (save for horror, which I added later).

Angga was particularly excited about the project, as it offered Visinema three new challenges for innovation, his raison d'être as CEO. First, he was going to do this entirely in-house, without any pre-existing commission from a streaming platform. This was to maintain total creative independence, which he'd sacrificed to certain degrees on recent projects ordered by Netflix and Disney Hotstar, and now wanted to try things a different way. It's a much riskier strategy, as Visinema would have to front the production budget for the whole series at once—not just a pilot episode—with the hope that it would sell to one of the streamers afterwards, at a

[3] It's a common saying that the name Ubud comes from the Balinese word 'ubad' meaning medicine (similar to the Indonesian 'obat'), representing its long historical importance as a place of healing and meditation. Most Balinese seem to accept this as fact, although others have told me they believe the near-homophonic connection was a more recent observation, some even claiming to know exactly who came up with it. Given the scant availability of pre-colonial writing on Ubud, this will likely endure as a social myth, with or without further confirmation.

high enough price to make a profit (or at least break even, opening the possibility of a higher price for a second season). There are some ways to minimize this risk, namely the concept of a ‘pre-buy’, which involves presenting the completed scripts and creative team to the streamers and convincing them to commit to buying it once completed, without exerting creative control. But achieving such an arrangement is complicated and rare, and therefore Angga would have to assume that this wouldn’t be the case.

Secondly, Angga wanted to go 'glocal'. During our first meeting in 2021, he’d spoken to me about Visinema’s long-term corporate strategy (which he felt was also the model that the rest of the industry ought to follow). This involved focusing first on building a strong brand and capturing the domestic Indonesian audience, before attempting to make big moves by producing content for overseas markets. He felt that Indonesian producers too often jumped the gun and attempted to go too big without “doing their homework first”, and he didn’t want to make that same mistake. But after a string of critically and commercially successful hits, he was ready to start thinking transitionally. He liked the idea of a story rooted in the culture and idiosyncrasies of a specific locale, building further on Visinema’s domestic audience, but with broad enough themes to make it appealing to global viewers, allowing for a much wider reach and therefore more selling power. That’s where I’d come in.

Finally, he wanted to find a way to make something about Ubudians that was funny, but not judgmental. The new age denizens of this town were odd, to be sure. Angga's main inspiration was a European woman he'd encountered while out with friends in Ubud who’d claimed to be a reincarnation of the wizard Merlin (who, perhaps it goes without saying, is a

fictional character of King Arthur's Camelot)[4]. "She was really friendly though. Crazy, but friendly", he told me. Angga's dilemma was that he'd never spent a long enough time in Ubud to really know the culture that well, aside from a few close friends from Jakarta who had moved there and apparently taken to walking barefoot in the street and switching to a vegetarian diet. Angga felt that the idea for the show as a spoof on this world had perhaps emerged from an overly judgmental place, and he wanted advice from someone that could look at it from a more nuanced perspective, hopefully capturing the full humanity of these characters even as they provided amusement for the audience.

On the one hand, I wasn't the best person to ask, given that I was extremely judgmental of the neospiritual world myself. Probably more so than Angga, having lived in proximity to it my entire life mostly by accident, first while growing up in Northern California, then attending school in Santa Cruz, and finally throughout my 20s living in various spiritual hotspots along what was once called the "banana pancake trail", including Kathmandu and indeed Ubud. But I had done a lot of work to challenge my preconceptions about neospiritualism and had even embraced it at times in my own *'Eat Pray Love'* era of Burning Man, sacred plant medicine ceremonies, and Vipassana meditation retreats in the Himalayas. Who was I to judge?

I didn't know specifically what Angga wanted from me, but he seemed to correctly intuit that I'd be drawn to the concept and could offer some ideas for where to take it. I told him I'd think about it and we could discuss it when we were both back in Jakarta the following month. But the more I sat with the story, the more I felt I had to say about it. All at once, a decade's worth of experiences came to bear—as a foreigner studying Indonesian culture and Indonesian

[4] Aside from the main story premise, Angga's one narrative stipulation was that we find a way to include this character in the show, which I was happy to oblige with the mystic social media influencer Morgana (named after an apprentice of Merlin's from Arthurian legend).

film, as a self-reflexive frequent tourist of Ubud, and as a millennial navigating their own spirituality and search for meaning in an information age paradoxically offering a paucity and overabundance of it. This also wasn't simply a creative exercise for me, it was an academic one. Subjects that I had researched extensively but hadn't found a way to examine through academic writing—from Indonesian gender roles to the gig economy to the social world of Balinese cockfighting—could instead be woven into a fictional narrative.

Over the following weeks I brainstormed and wrote manically every day, building an outline that eventually grew into a ten-episode pitch deck[5], complete with a concept for the visual look of the series, how the characters and storylines might unfold, what kind of themes would be explored through the journey, and what emotional tone would carry the viewer through it all. It was the first time in my life that a creative project had emerged fully formed in my mind, and I started to believe, with a certain amount of hubris, that it *needed* to be made. A chance to seek out middle cinema from a new direction, in one-hour chunks, on a smaller screen.

The Concept

Having never created a television series before, I didn't yet have a process, and therefore began the project like I begin almost everything, through unstructured brainstorming. I drew up a mind map of interconnecting themes, gradually pulling in every concern that had been piling up in my head over the past decade of my life visiting Bali: tourism and commercialization of culture connects to globalization and unequal exchange connects to whiteness and Orientalism connects to neospirituality and new age healing connects to Hinduism and Balinese identity connects to Indonesian national identity and Dutch colonialism connects to individualism and

[5] A pitch deck is a slideshow presented to prospective producers or funders, which breaks down the central story, concept art, and audience appeal for a proposed television or film project.

collectivism connects to neoliberal capitalism and influencer culture and life coaches and cryptocurrencies and digital nomads and gentrification connects back to tourism again.

In retrospect, this surfeit of ideas perhaps should have been a red flag that my reach was exceeding my grasp. But I felt that my job at this point was simply to accumulate raw material, which could later be sculpted into form. Furthermore, I'd seen recent examples of shows that had managed to incorporate a similarly wide range of concerns and still tell a coherent story and entertain viewers, so I wasn't totally out in the wilderness.

One of the primary components of a pitch deck is what's known as a 'show cross', which provides a shorthand for articulating the overall feel for a project by comparing it to several other existing titles (e.g. "*The Sopranos* meets *Lord of the Rings*" gives you *Game of Thrones*). In this case, I didn't have a lot of Indonesian programming to work with. One of the main reasons for doing the show was the fact that Indonesian TV had very little to offer beyond *sinetrons*, and there simply had never been anything close to what I was imagining, which drew inspiration from a particular strain of US comedy-drama series I'd been enjoying, including FX's *Atlanta* and *Reservation Dogs,* HBO's *The White Lotus* and *Barry,* and Netflix's *Russian Doll* and *Ramy*. The overlapping characteristics for all of these were wry, acerbic humor, punctuated by unexpected moments of genuine sentiment or confounding surrealism, all underpinned by existential themes, social commentary, and cultural depth. It's a difficult needle to thread, but I felt that even if we came up short, we'd still be giving the audience something truly fresh.

The show cross I'd eventually landed on was *Atlanta* meets *The White Lotus*. The former, created by music/comedy multihyphenate Donald Glover and one of the first television shows in US history to feature an all-Black writing staff, nominally centers on an up-and-coming rapper and his cousin/manager trying to make it big in the titular Georgia metropolis, but mostly uses

this basic setup as a departure point for wildly unpredictable and frequently surreal meditations on Black American culture and identity, alienation, and the absurdities of late capitalism. Glover, perhaps revealing his own show cross, has said that his intention from the start was simply to make "*Twin Peaks* with rappers". *The White Lotus* is somewhat inverse and complementary, with writer-director Mike White using the backdrop of various properties in the eponymous (and fictional) luxury resort chain as a narrative laboratory for deconstructing whiteness, class, and masculinity down to their constituent elements. With its focus on tourism, the show seems like the most obvious comparison point for our own, but while White mostly generates drama, farce, and critique out of the experiences of the foreign tourists and their resort hosts, sometimes with locals acting as foils for both, I wanted to do the opposite.

With *Ubudians*, we'd explore many of the same issues, but from the perspective of Indonesians in their own country, surrounded by tourists who often act as *their* foil. Furthermore, with the Balinese people presenting yet another antipode, the alienation experienced by our Jakartan main characters would be bidirectional. This wasn't a hypothetical dynamic. The Indonesian government's "Work From Bali" Covid-19 initiative, intended to support the ailing Balinese economy by sending state employees to work remotely from otherwise empty hotels, had also brought an influx of other young private sector workers who, with their own jobs now fully remote, saw a clear advantage to flee big cities like Jakarta for the comfort and beauty of Bali. With such increased proximity to both foreigners and Balinese, so too increased the frequency of conversations on identity, inequality, and social hierarchy, both in my own interactions with friends and interlocuters from Java living in Bali. To be a "local" who is "home" while feeling that neither is wholly accurate, to be encountering Western others while yourself constituting a "Western other" to the Balinese, was the sort of complexity I wanted to

see explored more in Indonesian media. This show could be a way to do that, but make it funny and gripping, not navel-gazing and dry.

But there was one more key aspect that Angga had presented to me which had spurred on my enthusiasm and investment in the show. The core story element driving the action would be this couple grappling with their marriage, but more importantly, with the question of parenthood. In my mid-30s at the time of writing the show, I was roughly the same age as the characters in the show, and having no children myself, I could highly relate to the profound existential crises that can arise when one starts to consider whether "later" may in fact mean "never", and then fully process the implications of that. While voluntary childlessness, or "child-free", has gradually gained more mainstream acceptance in high income countries, there remains a great deal of stigma and suspicion in Indonesia toward this lifestyle, making it difficult to even have open conversations about it with family and partners (Rizka et al. 2021). But there nonetheless exists a growing number of young professionals in Indonesia who are asking themselves these questions (Tunggono 2021).

As someone who has not yet *decided* to be child-free, but has at least accepted it as a potential future, I remain agnostic, but always seeking. And for this reason, sketching out the story arcs for the two main characters became something of a therapeutic exercise in integrating two conflicting parts of myself. In the character of the husband, who I called Andi, I challenged my own desire for independence by describing a man whose external ambitions and prioritization of intellectual self-fulfillment had made him untethered from community, family, and most importantly love. As a tech startup founder and a rational skeptic with an arrogant streak, Andi would discover in the spiritual world of Ubud something of a descent into hell. This was both for comedic reasons—his cynicism offering a chance to poke fun at all the absurdities

of tourism and wellness culture—as well as dramatic ones, with his experiences in Ubud repeatedly breaking him down until he experiences ego death and discovers inside himself a long-repressed desire for *interdependence*. By the finale, he comes to realize that true contentment for him can only come from needing and being needed by others, which means a deeper commitment to his wife, his family, and crucially, children.

Given my own propensity for dialectical monism, it was only natural that the journey of Andi's wife, who I called Lila, would follow an opposite path. Like most Indonesian women I'd met throughout my fieldwork there, I could imagine Lila being centrally preoccupied with the needs and expectations of others; her husband, her family, and her future children. The pressure to become a mother would be intense for her, especially as a successful corporate lawyer in her 30s, and her husband's lack of urgency would no doubt be an area of conflict for them. But if Andi's journey was about challenging a man's desire for independence, I felt like Lila's could be an opportunity to challenge the frequent *lack* of independence offered to women, in most places but especially in Indonesia. Lila would spend much of the series grappling with how to get her marriage back on track in order to become the ideal of a good wife, and a good mother, and therefore a good Indonesian woman. But her experience in Ubud gradually opens her mind up to other possibilities, more abstract and expansive ideas of what being a woman or even a mother could look like, grounded not only in contemporary feminist theory but also Indonesian history. In the finale, just as Andi is revealing his newfound purpose in raising children with her, Lila discovers that she doesn't want children at all, and instead leaves him and returns to her long-repressed dream of working in international human rights.

And so we end with their twin journeys toward interdependence and independence complete, bittersweet in the self-actualization of both characters and the dissolution of their

marriage, with just enough hope remaining for them to find each other again (and, crucially, for the possibility of a Season 2). Questions about partnership, parenthood, and self-actualization had brought to bear larger anthropological questions about the universality and nature of kinship and social reproduction in a globalized information age. Andi and Lila's dialectical oppositions could essentially stand in for dominant value systems and ideologies—individualism and collectivism, tradition and modernity, East and West, feminine and masculine, secular and spiritual—and hopefully destabilize at least some of them. The goal, ultimately, would not be to provide any prescriptive argument in favor or against any of them, but simply to provide a playground to explore. Essentially, *Ubudians* would be speculative fiction, set in the real world (if that's indeed what Ubud is).

The Pitch

As planned, I reconvened with Angga in Jakarta a few weeks after we first spoke about the show in Ubud. He was excited to find out that I'd created a pitch deck slideshow, and convened a meeting at Visinema HQ with some of his senior producers in person and over Zoom for me to present the concept. I felt confident in the material, but nervous about the response. I'd already workshopped the show quite a bit with my Indonesian friends, who were all thrilled about watching it, if it got produced. But I still wasn't sure if I had gone overboard and created a concept that was commercially unviable, so I tried to keep my expectations low and hope that at bare minimum they'd like some of my ideas enough to use them, and allow me to stick around and participate in the writing process. Luckily whatever concerns I had were immediately assuaged by the second slide, where I'd added a photo of the page in my notebook where I'd written my initial mind map. Angga nearly doubled over laughing when it came up on the screen,

and took a photo with his phone[6]. He was enthralled with the sheer volume of insane and incomprehensibly esoteric references and demanded that I explain many of them in detail (e.g. ecstatic dance, chromotherapy, ayahuasca), which produced even more laughter from the group.

I was relieved. Even if I'd gotten everything else wrong, I could take comfort in the validation of my instinct that the bewildering novelty of these concepts, and seeing them happen here in Indonesia, could at least be *funny*. I still felt some concern that my scattered ADHD braindump was being misread as evidence of some brilliant master plan; that because I was able to draw all these disparate bubbles together, I (or someone else) must therefore be capable of integrating them in a narratively coherent and satisfying way. But having been taught repeatedly through years of academia to "fake it 'til you make it", I chose to believe this myself. Continuing through the storyline and outlining each episode, seemed to get everyone more excited, especially Angga.

By the end of the hour-long presentation, Angga had no doubt that the show was going to be a hit, and wanted to fast-track it, directing his business team to start looking at budgets. I'd finished on an image of the Pyramids of Chi, a complex on the northern edge of Ubud built to resemble miniature versions of the original limestone-covered Egyptian tombs, only hollow inside for holding sound healing sessions with groups of people laying prone around a set of gongs and singing bowls. I hadn't actually included it in the story, but Angga was already talking about how to build one of our own to shoot in.

As usual, Angga way was ahead of me. After spending some time consulting with his partners about informing Netflix and starting the search for potential directors and writers, he sat

[6] On multiple future occasions, Angga would take out his phone to show the mind map to friends and fellow producers visiting the Visinema office, and even insisted that the company's graphics team have it transcribed and turned into a series of slides in the official pitch deck we eventually used to present to the streaming platforms.

down next to me and asked how I was feeling. I told him I was just happy they liked it, that I really believed it could be something fresh and compelling for Indonesian and global viewers, and that I hoped to stay involved in whatever way made sense. Of course, after spending a month doing nothing but imagining and living in the story world, I had gotten a bit attached. And while the thought had crossed my mind that Angga might want me to play a more central role, I felt no sense of entitlement to it, given the total lack of film credits to my name. Angga got straight to the point: "So Galen, I spoke with my team, and we all want to go ahead with Ubudians, and your role as creator and showrunner, what do you think about that?"

I didn't hesitate to say yes. I told him I was confident I could take this on, and in fact, out of all the potential films and shows I'd imagined myself making over the years, this was perhaps the only one I could say that about. But I wanted to reiterate that, even with my academic background and experience in film production, this would still be new ground for me, and I didn't want to oversell my ability. Angga assured me it wasn't a problem, and revealed that he had actually been thinking about this for a while. "I knew you'd be good with the conceptual side of things. Plot structure is something that's easier to work out with writers, but to have strong concept and vision, that is a lot more rare," he said, adding that Visinema was still developing its creative structures and that they hadn't actually had a showrunner for a series yet, meaning we could experiment and design the role based on my strengths.

My fieldwork, which was almost over by this point, had suddenly become upended again. It was too unique of an opportunity to turn down and, given the centrality of participant observation to ethnographic research, could only deepen my understanding of the possibilities and challenges facing filmmakers in Indonesia. And, for better and for worse, that's exactly what happened.

Chapter 2: Simulacra and Simulation in Bali

Excerpt from the series bible of Ubudians *describing the story world:*

Bali: A global melting pot of cultures and contradictions

As a highly populous Hindu-dominant island in the middle of the world's largest Muslim-majority country, Bali obviously has a rich and complex history which forms the backbone of this story. It lies directly on the fault line between tradition and modernity, with its deep cultural practices—many dating back a thousand years—forming the main engine powering the tourism industry that itself is so rapidly changing the island. Dutch colonizers treated the island as a "living museum", protecting this culture at the same time they were exploiting and abusing those who had created it.

Eventually, Bali gained world renown as a global destination for cultural tourism, its beautiful landscapes and friendly faces appearing in travel magazines from Mumbai to New York City. Ubud is in many ways the island's crown jewel, possessing much of the traditional architecture and handicrafts that tourists most associate with Bali. At the same time, it's become a mecca for global new age spirituality, a vast and eclectic collage of Eastern and Western philosophies which emerged in the mid-20th century, focusing on attaining personal growth, healing, and transcendence through an endless array of methods as common as yoga and meditation or as esoteric as crystal medicine and astral projection.

Ironically, most of these practices have little to do with Balinese culture, and the Balinese themselves often view them with bemusement at best. Nevertheless, they have left a lasting impact on the island as it adapts to fit the needs of these foreigners (tourism accounts for around three-quarters of Bali's economy). So too has the most recent wave of tourism, so-called "digital nomads", location-independent remote workers who, having the choice to live anywhere in the world, have chosen to settle tax-free in beautiful and "cheap" places like Bali.

And foreigners aren't the only ones either. Many Indonesians, particularly from large cities like Jakarta in neighboring Java, are relocating to Bali, either for the same reasons, or to escape from the urban challenges or social/religious restrictions they face at home. This was exacerbated during the Covid-19 pandemic, with the national government (and many private companies) instituting a "Work from Bali" policy, allowing their employees to relocate there. Some decided to never go back.

Which brings us to this moment. All of these contradictions simmer underneath the surface of an idyllic, untouched paradise. And they've resulted in growing concerns that will soon need to be addressed, whether it's increased tensions between Bali and nearby Java, or the disproportionate amount of tourist revenue taken by non-Balinese (estimates are as high as 85%), or the ongoing crises of land reclamation and freshwater shortages.

What does it mean to come to Ubud for healing? The word literally translates to 'medicine' in the local language, but whose medicine is being used, who gets access to it, and what is the cost, both for the people seeking it and for the people who provide it? And at the center of all these different and sometimes contradictory cultural ideas, how does one decide what kind of life is good, and which one they want to live?

While Angga had his primary motivations for wanting to do the show, I also had some of my own. Chief among them was to offer a corrective to the kind of representation Bali had received in popular media throughout history. I didn't simply want Ubud to be a backdrop for a story that could just as easily have taken place in Chiang Mai or Tulum, nor did I want to exotify its cultural identity to the point of caricature. This was an opportunity to deconstruct—without destroying, ideally—an image that had been cultivated over a century of colonialism, nationalism, and globalization. So before we embark on the rest of the *Ubudians* journey, it's important to first establish what exactly that image looks like, how it came into existence, and how it's created the lifeworld in which our show would be set.

A Brief History of Bali (and Ubud) on Film

As with anything involving Western representation of Bali, the German painter and musician Walter Spies plays an outsized role. By the early 1900s, the Dutch colonial government had finally conquered the last of the remaining Balinese kingdoms and established the entire island as a protectorate. But unlike the final holdouts, which were devastated by violence during their final years of resistance, Ubud (and neighboring Gianyar) had voluntarily submitted themselves to Dutch rule, and were thus spared. Starting in the mid-1920s, the *punggawa* (Dutch-appointed district administrator) of Ubud, Cokorda Gde Raka Sukawati, began inviting artists to stay in the village, as a means of promoting its value as a cultural site.

One such artist was the Moscow-born and German-raised Spies, who had previously been living in Yogyakarta, but upon coming to Ubud became so enamored with the area that he decided to build a house there, and spent the better part of two decades devoted to developing his own art, and that of the Balinese. Spies' home would become a hub for international and local

artists to visit and collaborate, with figures like film star Charlie Chaplin, Bengali polymath Rabindranath Tagore, American socialite Barbara Hutton, and anthropologists Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson being among his more noteworthy guests.

But it was his 1933 collaboration with a fellow German filmmakers Victor Baron von Plessen and Friedrich Dalsheim on their film *Island of Demons (Insel der Dämonen)* which left the most indelible mark on both the study and depiction of Balinese culture and on Balinese culture itself. Spies had prior experience with film through his close relationship with the famed German expressionist director F.W. Murnau[7], who had invited Spies to advise him on several films back in Germany, including 1922's *Nosferatu* (Atkins 2012). Spies had also worked previously as a cultural and artistic advisor on a number of films in Bali, including the ethnographic films of W. Mullens, *Royal Cremation* and *Sang Hyang and Kecak Dance*, both released in 1926, as well as *Goona-Goona/The Kris* (Andre Roosevelt and Armand Denis, 1932).

With *Island of Demons*, Spies took a more central role, acting as ethnographic advisor and choreographer for the film's elaborate ritual scenes. For the climax, Spies worked with elders and performers from the village Bedulu, including a young dancer named I Wayan Limbak, to stage a performance of the purification rite *sanghyang dedari*, normally performed during epidemics and other catastrophes (Picard 1996). Like many such rituals in Bali, it involves several dancers entering a trance state (*kerauhan*), accompanied by a gamelan orchestra, in this case *gamelan mulut*, vocal choruses of female and male singers.

Spies found himself enamored with the practice, especially the male chorus, whose hypnotic interlocking vocalizations of the syllable *cak* forms the foundation of the ritual's second half, and felt inspired to work with Limbak—also his driver at the time—to develop a non-

[7] Murnau had also planned to work on a pseudo-ethnographic film in Bali with Spies and filmmaker Robert J. Flaherty, but instead shot the project in Bora Bora in 1931, what would become his final film *Tabu* (Atkins 2012).

ritualistic version, performed as accompaniment to a story from the *Ramayana* (Picard 1996; Stepputat 2012). This new performance was known as *kecak*, or the "monkey chant", and immediately became popular with Bali's growing tourist crowds in the mid-1930s, along with other dances like the *legong* and *barong and kris*. Although *The Island of Demons* did not feature the newly developed *kecak*, its depictions of Balinese traditions like the *sanghyang dedari* greatly inspired the European imaginary of Bali as a rich source of culture (Green 2002).

At the time, Balinese languages lacked any word for 'culture', as well as 'art' or 'dance', as nearly every form had a specific ritualistic or social function, but the development of the *kebyar* gamelan genre in North Bali in 1915 had already opened up the possibility of detaching a cultural practice "from its theatrical content as well as from its ritual context in order to be turned into an art form in its own right" (Picard 1996:140). This process played out repeatedly during the Dutch colonial project of *baliseering* or "Balinisation", wherein administrators attempted to turn the island into "living museum", as a "showcase of enlightened colonial rule, on the grounds that they were protecting Balinese culture" (Howe 2005:19). That involved the Dutch teaching the Balinese how to *be* Balinese, largely influenced by their own Orientalized imagining—by way of anthropologists and historians—of the original, untainted Hindu culture that had existed throughout the archipelago during the Majapahit era (Picard 1996:20). What was created was essentially a *simulacra* (Baudrillard 1994) of Balinese culture, which Balinese would strategically simulate at first for an international audience, as a means for attracting tourists for economic development, and then increasingly for a national one, as a member of the nascent Republic of Indonesia.

While films like *Island of Demons* were helping establish a European sensibility toward preserving traditional cultures through colonial paternalism, in the United States it was the less

ethnographic, and more overtly lascivious, of these Bali-set films which had the greatest impact on audiences, and therefore on the future course of Hollywood representation. Roosevelt's *Goona-Goona* had become a sensation when it premiered in New York City, and as Fatimah Tobing Rony notes in her book *The Third Eye,* gave rise to an eponymous new class of primitivist "Goona-Goona" films staged in the Far East, their purportedly "ethnographic" nature allowing producers to circumvent censors and depict naked Balinese breasts onscreen, providing titillation to viewers in both exotic and erotic variants (Rony 1996).

Miguel Covarrubias—a painter living in Ubud and a close friend of Walter Spies—wrote in 1937 that "Goona-goona", a Balinese term for 'love magic', "became at the time *newyorkese* for sex allure… The newly discovered 'last paradise' became the contemporary substitute for the nineteenth-century romantic conception of primitive Utopia" (Covarrubias 1937:391) and the films, as Adrian Vickers argues, "can be credited with linking sex and magic in the popular image of Bali" (Vickers 2012:154). Demonstrating the value placed on thrills over cultural education in the U.S., a *Hollywood Reporter* review from 1932 said of *Goona-Goona*: "What other Balinese films have amply portrayed, such as religious rites and queer dance customs of the people, are only slightly dwelt upon in this film, the producers being chiefly concerned with the development of the drama. Which is a welcome relief, indeed."[8]

Soon followed even more exploitative (and therefore more popular) films, including *Virgins of Bali* (Deane H. Dickason, 1932) and *Legong: Dance of the Virgins* (Henri de la Falaise, 1935). In his book on Pre-Code Hollywood films, Thomas Doherty describes the plot of *Virgins of Bali* as serving only "to flaunt the bodies of a pair of beautiful Balinese teenagers"

[8] "'GOONA GOONA' PICTURESQUE ROMANCE OF ISLAND OF BALI: PICTORIALLY FINE, BUT LITTLE INTEREST," *The Hollywood Reporter (Archive: 1930-2015)* 11, no. 50 (September 21, 1932): 7.

adding a quote from a review in *Variety* which noted that, at the New York City premiere of the film, "the house was nearly full and not a score of women in the 300-seater" (in Doherty 1999:235)[9]. It's not difficult to see how the history of tourism in Bali (and Southeast Asia) was from the very start implicated and intertwined with an older history of white sexual imperialism, which exists to this day in the form of sex tourism.

In aggregate, the Goona-Goona films produced a new orientalist visage of the noble/ignoble savage tropes that had flourished in Europe and the New World for centuries, but now rendered more vivid, synchronous, and *real* by the spectacle and simulation of the cinematic gaze. No longer were these exotic, preserved-in-time utopias only imaginable through reading of travel literature, or glimpsed through static photographs. These places could now be experienced as 'actually out there', readily accessible. Even as future waves of tourism (as discussed in the next section) focused more on cultural appreciation, self-actualization and spiritual development, a core remnant persists of a consumptive practice of the other. Untouched paradise represented in the archetype of the virgin, available and waiting for the intrepid white male adventurer.

Eventually the outbreak of World War II both in the Netherlands and in the Pacific brought a halt to international productions in Bali, but the popular imagination of the island paradise did not fade from Western minds. Some films, like *Road to Bali* (Hal Walker, 1952)—the sixth of seven in the successful Bing Crosby and Bob Hope comedy series—were filmed on the backlots and sound stages of Paramount Studios, with white actors in yellowface playing the exotic locals. Not only was this more convenient than dealing with the political instability in Indonesia at the time, but it also alleviated any obligation to present Balinese culture in a

[9] *Legong* too was also a massive success in New York, playing for ten straight weeks at the World Theater, and was especially noteworthy for being one of the last Hollywood films to use the two-color Technicolor process, and one of the final feature films from the silent era (Bloom and Hagedorn 2013).

remotely authentic way. The costumes, architecture, language, and music are the standard "exotica" mish-mash found in the widely popular Tiki culture, assembled out of tropes and references from Polynesia, Africa, the Amazon, the Caribbean, and across the span of Asia.

Post-Independence attempts to revive the Goona-Goona genre found a new barrier to overcome. President Sukarno's nationalist movement had initially been friendly to the United States, who—after several years of ambivalence—had come to support the Indonesian state by exerting economic pressure on the Dutch to enter negotiations for ceding claim to their former colony. But by the mid-1950s, a resurgent Indonesian Communist Party (PKI), as well as Sukarno's own central role in the nascent international non-aligned movement, was producing a growing skepticism and distrust toward the United States and Europe.

Following the containment policy of President Harry S. Truman, and under the guidance of Secretary of State John Foster Dulles and his brother, Director of Central Intelligence Allen Dulles, the U.S. had adopted an increasingly aggressive stance toward "international communism", which in Indonesia had resulted in multiple attempts to destabilize Sukarno's government, including a failed CIA-backed coup in 1958 (Bevins 2020). Distrust turned to outright anger, represented best by the popular song and slogan of the early 1960s Konfrontasi era, "Ganyang Inggris Amerika (Crush England and America)". By the early 1960s, film industry trade unions like the Indonesian Film Workers' Union (SARBUFIS) had successfully agitated for limits on American film imports and newsreels, and in 1964, along with representatives from other unions and PKI-affiliated organizations, formed the 'Committee for Action to Boycott the Imperialist Films of the United States of America' (PAPFIAS), pushed the government to announce a progressive ban on American films (Sen 1994:34).

Foreign productions like 1951's *Black Magic of Bali,* seeking to appeal to the same exotic niche as the Goona-Goona films were banned from Indonesia, having been deemed "politically unacceptable because they depicted the black and brown peoples of Asia and Africa as primitive or backward" (Sen 1994:25). The producer of *Road to Bali*, discussing the reason for not shooting on the island, noted "our political relations with Indonesia are too touchy. We don't want the picture to do anything that would make them worse… Censorship has gotten to the point where the only villain you can identify on the screen is an American" (in Legêne, Purwanto, and Nordholt 2015:149). And while the arrival of President Suharto's New Order regime in 1966 loosened restrictions on imports and foreign productions, censorship of politically sensitive themes only increased, whether regarding internal divisions or Indonesia's increasingly cozy relationship with Western capital. Filmmakers hoping to challenge foreign—or especially state—narratives of social harmony would need to resort to more subtle forms of critique.

Tourists and Mystics

Prior to the 1970s, the shape of tourism in Bali had remained more or less as it had been in the days of Walter Spies, with a few thousand visitors each year. But that changed rapidly, as the opening of a new international airport in 1968 converged with a rapid growth of Western tourism in Southeast Asia. This was driven by a number of factors, economic, social, and political. For one thing, the post-World War II economic expansion had doubled or in some cases tripled the GDP per capita of most Western countries, while most Southeast Asian countries were undergoing violent and devastating political or decolonial conflicts, depressing

economic growth. The baby boomer generation was now entering adulthood in a time of unparalleled prosperity, and many could afford to travel anywhere on the planet.

By the same token, this prosperity had given rise to countercultural movements which were critical of the industrialized capitalist system that had produced it, and were leading young people to seek out alternative paths. Some of these paths led them to spiritual esotericism, a spectrum of heterodox and occult practices which over the course of the mid-20th century began to increasingly incorporate or appropriate "Eastern" religion, philosophy, and mysticism. The writings of Alan Watts, Timothy Leary, and Ram Dass, and the intrigue generated by The Beatles traveling to India and studying transcendental meditation with the Maharishi, further popularized the spread of these ideas, coalescing into what would eventually be referred to as the New Age movement. After evolving further with global neoliberalism, the commonly used blanket term today, which I employ throughout this dissertation, is *neospirituality*.

Bali eventually came to represent the Easternmost point of the "Hippie Trail"[10], a mythic overland journey beginning in Europe, passing through the Middle East and the Indian Subcontinent, and finishing in Southeast Asia. Given the radical economic disparity between these Western backpackers and the newly developing nations they were traversing, even those who had followed Leary's advice to "drop out"—often by refusing to participate in the workforce—could easily afford to spend months living on a couple dollars a day, hitchhiking or sharing rides on painted VW buses. Stapled booklets[11] gave tips on finding cheap hostels or ashrams in Goa, respecting the local customs of Istanbul, or scoring hashish in Kathmandu. This

[10] By the time I began traveling in Southeast Asia in my early 20s, this route was being referred to as the "banana pancake trail", in reference to the now-ubiquitous Western comfort dish found anywhere from tea houses along Himalayan mountain treks in Nepal to beachside cafes in Bali.

[11] Two notable examples, Maureen and Tony Wheeler's *Across Asia on the Cheap* (1973) and Geoff Crowther's *Overland to India and Australia* (1975) would eventually evolve into the travel guide mega giant *The Lonely Planet*.

range of concerns illustrates the multivalent nature of the Hippie Trail (and perhaps of the New Age movement more broadly), at once motivated by a genuine drive for spiritual evolution, and a more base pursuit of inexpensive hedonistic pleasures.

These motivations converged in Bali from all directions—Europeans from the West, Australians from the South, and increasingly Americans from the East. The New Order government had consciously developed the island for mass tourism as an engine for economic growth, initially limited to the southern peninsula to protect the Balinese way of life, but gradually spreading across the island as the number of visitors grew. The epicenter of the hippie travel scene was Kuta Beach, which had long been popular for its legendary surf breaks, but gradually became known as a cesspool of drugs, sex and consumer excess, a reputation that persists to this day. The guide books offered a sobering assessment of the island: "Rapidly going downhill" (Wheeler 1973:50). This sentiment has now been inherited through generations, as each new cohort of travelers is told by the one immediately preceding it that "the old Bali" (whether of the 70s, 90s, or 2010s) has been lost forever.

During this period, foreign film productions in Bali and throughout Indonesia had, apart from a few nature and surf documentaries, become rare, in large part due to the stringent script approval process required by the Ministry of Information (Marshall 1981; Sen 1994:66). At the same time, the Indonesian government and film production companies were now considering film exports as a potential area of growth for the country and for the industry. State-sponsored delegations of producers were sent to film markets and festivals around the world to begin selling distribution rights to Indonesian films.

However, after several of these trips it became clear that the "idealistic" or "quality" films preferred by the Ministry of Information for "cultural and educational purposes" were not

selling, and that the demand from global buyers was purely for "exploitation" films, cheaply produced B-movies aimed at secondary markets like independent cinemas, drive-ins, and eventually home video (Barker and Imanjaya 2020:245–46). The name comes from the tendency for these films to "exploit" taboo subjects and current trends, often with an excessive degree of violence, sex, and other salacious content to allure viewers.

As Ekky Imanjaya explains, "although the New Order and its cultural elites had their own ideology and politics of taste towards the concept of national cinema, they could not compete with the politics of taste of the global buyers" (Imanjaya 2016:122). The government initiative was disbanded after a few years, but some enterprising filmmakers and producers in Indonesia carried on with this strategy, independently approaching foreign distribution and co-production partners not only as a means to access the global market, but also increasingly as a loophole to produce exactly the kind of exploitation films desired by that market (Barker and Imanjaya 2020:248).

One such filmmaker was Tjut Djanjil, who for more than a decade mastered a small niche of creating small budget genre films aimed at drawing overseas (and especially U.S.) audiences with English dubbing, Western lead actors, and plenty of gratuitous gore and nudity. Sometimes these took the form of "mockbusters", a particular subset of exploitation films designed to capitalize on a major Hollywood film's success by employing a similar title, theme, or marketing material. This was true for *Satan's Bed* (1986), which draws from *Nightmare on Elm Street* (Wes Craven, 1984) to tell a story of teenagers being murdered in their dreams by a grotesque razor-clawed killer. The actual plot of *Lady Terminator* (1989) on the other hand bears little resemblance to its eponym *The Terminator* (James Cameron, 1984), instead repackaging a

classic Queen of the South Sea myth—frequently employed in Indonesian horror—with an aesthetic coating of neon lights, leather jackets, and sunglasses.

The Indonesian government found such representations to be highly offensive and damaging to the image of the country. *Lady Terminator* was banned from distribution in Indonesia, but due to the aforementioned loophole, international co-productions fell into a gray area of regulatory oversight, and therefore the government could not do much about preventing its export overseas, where it eventually gained a cult following throughout Europe and the United States. And while it's easy to understand why the lurid content and overall "trashiness" of these films rankled the New Order so much, it's also interesting to view them today in terms of their address to that global audience, and the shift from Indonesia being represented by foreigners to themselves, to being represented by Indonesians to foreigners.

Aside from Djalil's other signature touches like hyperviolence and mockbusting, there's a noticeable theme running through many of his films about the impact of foreigners on Indonesia. Djalil's stated motivation for casting non-Indonesians in lead roles—to connect with global viewers and generate novelty and intrigue for domestic ones—makes sense on its own merits. But the function those roles play in the stories of the films is revealing. In *Lady Terminator*, Tania is an American graduate student in anthropology (a little too close to home) working in Indonesia towards her thesis on the Queen of the South Sea legend. In *Dangerous Seductress* (1992), Suzy is an American (again), who discovers an occult book while visiting her sister in Jakarta, and can't help but read some of the spells aloud. And in *Mystics of Bali* (1981), Cathie is an American researcher interested in witchcraft traditions, who after studying voodoo in Haiti has now come to Indonesia to learn about Balinese black magic for a book she plans to publish back home.

In all three cases, the young woman unleashes an ancient evil which possesses her and causes her to go on a killing (and seducing) spree. While many Indonesian horror films follow a similar plotline, with young people unwittingly unleashing a spirit who then takes its revenge, the positionality of these women adds a critical extra dimension. These foreigners are not coming to Indonesia for—at least on a surface level—nefarious reasons. They each have an earnest desire to learn more about local culture. But that desire is not benign. It represents an extractive power, the ability for foreigners to use their privileged status to gain access to resources (in this case, knowledge) which in turn grants them more status and cultural capital.

Mystics in Bali, while most relevant to the subject at hand, is also noteworthy in representing an early critique of this phenomenon. At the end of the 1970s, Tjut Djalil had been a newspaper reporter interested in directing films, and was introduced to the popular Balinese novel *Leák Ngakak (Liak Laughing),* written by Putra Mada in 1978. In the original book Cathie is Australian, but otherwise follows the same path as the film, befriending Balinese sailor Mahendra, who out of love for Cathie helps her seek out a *liak*, a shapeshifting practitioner of Balinese black magic (*pangiwa*). Cathie, after learning its transformative magic, is then used by the liak to find pregnant women and devour their unborn children. By the end, Cathie has been lost to the black magic and must be killed, either by Mahendra (as in the novel) or by his grandfather, who in the film is a witch-doctor.

Balinese literature scholar I Nyoman Darma Putra notes that the book, aside from being "the first Balinese novel to involve a Western tourist as a major character," was also "the first to use the character as an instrument through which to express reservations about tourism's impacts on Bali" (Putra 2012a:209). As Putra points out, these reservations are stated most forcefully by Cathie, rather than by the Balinese characters like Mahendra. She laments the imminent or

ongoing loss of Bali's beauty and unique character, and the influx of "hippies", that newer cohort of tourist on the island, only there for the cheap accommodation and surfing, and unappreciative of its culture.

This choice of attribution is understandable for a number of reasons. For one thing, the virtue of hospitality to guests ("tamu") reigns supreme in Balinese culture. Particularly when I'm speaking to those working in the tourism industry, Balinese people will be very hesitant to express any frustrations with foreigners or their impacts (though, as discussed later, this is beginning to change). Furthermore, as Putra writes, memories of the mass killings which took place in Bali as part of the larger 1965-66 communist purge still lingered strongly in New Order era Indonesia, and adding in government's cooperation with international organizations like World Bank in developing the island for mass tourism, "the criticisms of ordinary Balinese could be silenced in the face of such institutional power" (Putra 2012a:210). Envisaging conscious tourists aware of Bali's problems and willing to call them out offers a useful foil for exploring them without fear of backlash or reprisal.

But let's not assume that this narrative position frees Cathie of her complicity. In fact, despite all her concern for Bali's culture and the backpacking hippies that seem to degrade it, it's Cathie herself who commits the worst offense of all, by exploring the world of black magic and unleashing it on the Balinese people, some of whom are killed by it. Furthermore, Cathie's central motivation to extract this knowledge and share it with the West also conjures an emerging discourse on the threats of neocolonialism in Bali. Not only do the forces of global capitalism and national development have the potential to transform the island internally, they can also result in the Balinese losing control of their cultural traditions through expropriation (Suartika and Cuthbert 2022). These traditions which "underpin identity", as Putra writes, "need

to be defended at all costs, even if the price is distraught friends, heartbroken lovers and the occasional dead Westerner" (Putra 2012b:260).

Also embedded here is an inherent critique of anthropology, made most overt by the characterization of Tania in *Lady Terminator.* Like many Indonesian films, the primary conflict is not about good vs. evil, but about order vs. disorder, a story structure inherited from *wayang* shadow plays (Heider 1991:34–38). The outsider, the cultural enthusiast, the anthropologist, does not pose a threat because they have ill intent towards Indonesians. They represent agents of chaos, who can uproot, reconfigure, or destroy entire cultures simply through their curiosity in local knowledge and practices, and sincere desire to share their enthusiasm with others back home. As a self-critical anthropologist, I sympathize with this view, and found Djalil's embedded critique highly resonant with the kind of themes I hoped to explore in *Ubudians*.

Eat, Pray, Loathe

By the mid-1990s, a million tourists were arriving in Bali each year, leading to concerns about overdevelopment, economic inequality, water shortages, ecological devastation, and loss of cultural practices. But these challenges would only become exacerbated in the new millennium. In 2010, the film *Eat, Pray, Love* (Ryan Murphy), adapted from the bestselling memoir by Elizabeth Gilbert, became a surprise box office hit. Starring Julia Roberts as Gilbert, the story follows the recent divorcee as she sets off on a global journey to find herself, first in Italy, then India, and finally in Bali. While it's perhaps been overstated that the film singlehandedly transformed tourism in Bali—the coinciding rise of social media was likely an even more significant factor—it did do much to popularize what had previously been a mostly niche thread of global travel: spiritual and wellness tourism.

By the end of the 2010s, the annual tourist arrivals in Bali had exploded from one million to more than six million. But this increase in sheer volume occludes more dramatic shifts in tourist *practices*. In *Eat, Pray, Love,* Gilbert doesn't simply drop into Bali for a long weekend, following a packed itinerary of visiting beaches and cultural sites in the south, before hopping on a plane back to the U.S. (as had been imagined by the Balinese when the industry was developed in the 70s and 80s). Instead, she moves to the comparatively sleepy cultural hub of Ubud and rents a villa for several months, following in the footsteps of Walter Spies and others who wanted to know the "real Bali". She spends her time meeting with healers and building her "family" of Balinese locals. Given that Gilbert had no intention of spending the rest of her life in Bali or investing her time and energy in Indonesian society, this sort of integration might seem unnecessary or even counterproductive. But her stay was nonetheless indefinite, given the open-ended nature of a search for meaning, and therefore could offer a simulacrum of becoming grounded or rooted in a community.

Produced from the film, and the wave of bloggers and influencers who followed in its wake, was what Ruth Williams has coined the "female neoliberal spiritual subject", a consumer "who expresses her spirituality through spending, [and] is also encouraged to adopt a depoliticized outlook that ignores oppressive social realities in favor of a therapeutically tinged focus on herself" (2014:616). In Ubud today, indices of this subjectivity are most visible at popular vegan restaurants like Sayuri, Alchemy, or Zest, which all feature large billboards covered with dozens of glossy colorful posters advertising upcoming events like high priestess initiation trainings and women's full moon ceremonies, and a host of life coaches specialized in authentic relating, tantric transformation, and accessing the divine feminine through communion with the Akashic Records.

It should be added that, while Williams was primarily writing about women due to the book and film's clear targeting of that demographic (as is true with the woman-centric spiritual wellness industry at large), this neoliberal spiritual subject now most certainly includes men, who have carved out their own niche in Ubud with group workshops on divine masculine awakening, primal warrior retreats in the jungle, and tantric coaching to facilitate maximum pleasure and grounding for the goddess. Emphasizing the neoliberal aspect, these events often come with discussions on achieving "financial freedom" through business development and cryptocurrency investing.

Today, Ubud is filled to the brim with foreign (and, increasingly, Indonesian) members of a fluctuating but persistent *spiritual community,* which overlaps in odd and disjunctured ways with broader Balinese spiritual life. Yoga training and wellness retreat centers draw visitors from around the world, who after years of searching, find their "tribe" of fellow wanderers in this magic town, planting roots for some indefinite period of time while developing their own unique assemblage of spiritual practices. They might find themselves in a single day joining an "authentic relating" circle at the Australian-owned mega-institution The Yoga Barn in the morning, accompanying their Balinese *ibu* (mother) for a *melukat* (water cleansing ritual) at a local temple in the afternoon, and then showing up at the Sayuri vegan restaurant later that night to sing a Westernized version of Hindu Kirtan, do a chaga-infused cacao ceremony, and then lose themselves in the "tribal beats" of ecstatic dance or 5Rhythms. What the next day holds, and the next after that, is up to the universe to decide.

The new economic dream (or nightmare) of the Balinese is increasingly centered on catering to these new long-term tourists. No longer only reliant on inconsistent, low-wage, or physically exhausting labor like driving taxis or working as guides (or indeed planting rice),

many Balinese are instead building villas, often by selling their rice fields, in the hopes of attracting foreign renters for months or even years at a time. There have been signs that these changes are contributing to effects that look quite similar to the gentrification[12] seen in ethnically and economically diverse urban centers in the US and Europe which, after an influx of young upper-middle class transplants, are now struggling with rising prices that can displace long-term residents (Suyadnya 2022). Many of the myriad existing social and environmental concerns of tourism, like property overdevelopment, deforestation, and water shortages, are also exacerbated by these trends.

And while I hesitate to further abuse the term past its limits, discourses on gentrification also now include its more cultural and aesthetic forms. Gradually the eclectic and quirky mix of Balinese, Javanese, and global styles of architecture, food, and activities are becoming overwritten by a homogenized minimalist hipster aesthetic that is formed, popularized, and propagated by and through social media algorithms, what Kyle Chayka (2024) calls "filterworld". Think austere white walls with tables made from reclaimed wood, artisan stone lain dinnerware, Edison bulbs hanging unadorned from ceilings, accompanied by a curated Spotify playlist of trendy world beats. Basically, a Brooklyn coffee shop, complete with menus featuring matcha lattes and avocado toast. And here just as there, everyone is on a laptop or taking perfectly framed photos of their food for Instagram.

In *Filterworld*, Chayka concedes that such globalizing processes are not new, especially in tourist areas with a high degree of cultural and economic exchange, but also notes that "the faster the exchange, the faster the similarity sets in" (Chayka 2024:90). The first time I visited

[12] It's not easy to directly apply a concept like gentrification to an island like Bali, given that locals and foreigners have mostly separate housing markets, with the former primarily owning homes, and the latter primarily renting due to strict property laws. Furthermore, many Balinese constructing new rental villas opt to stay in their original home, either on the bottom floor, or in a separate house in the same complex.

Ubud in 2010, I questioned a Balinese café owner about his unusually eclectic range of coffee drinks, including several I'd never encountered before, such as the piccolo and flat white (essentially smaller and stronger versions of a latte). He told me he'd been fortunate enough to have worked for a year as a barista in Melbourne, Australia, and had brought back some ideas with him. This was not limited to the menu, but also the décor, notably the minimalist aesthetic, save for a few faux-vintage French travel posters and road signs, which he had to special order from Vietnam. In the years since, the trend spread organically, and I noticed an increasing number of similar minimalist cafés featuring flat whites, both in Bali and Jakarta.

But just over a decade later, things tend to move much faster, and one needn't travel to Australia to become familiar with their coffee trends. Chayka explains:

> "the growth of Instagram gave international café owners and baristas a way to follow each other in real time and gradually, via algorithmic recommendations, begin consuming the same kinds of café-related content. One café owner's personal taste would drift toward what the rest of them liked, too, eventually coalescing into a net average. On the other side of the business equation, Yelp, Foursquare, and Google Maps drove customers like me—who could also follow the popular aesthetics on Instagram—toward cafés that conformed with what they wanted to see by putting those cafés at the top of searches or highlighting them on a map. (Chayka 2024:91)

Outside the main tourist drags in Bali, where pedestrians might walk into businesses spontaneously, the biggest driver of traffic tends to be these social media algorithms, making adherence to their popular standards not merely a matter of keeping up with trends, but a necessity for survival. Café owners and employees now encourage patrons to take photos which capture the desired aesthetics and food options and share them on their social media networks, along with reviewing and "checking in" with them to promote their ranking, thus perpetuating "the cycle of aesthetic optimization and homogenization" (ibid.:91). This same process has

played out around Bali in hotels and rental villas, bars and restaurants, cruise boats and beach clubs, as the economy of images has become the core component of global tourism.

Chayka likens these spaces to Marc Augé's "non-places", with their total homogeneity and lack of identity producing a sense of alienation and transience. But unlike the baggage claims, shopping marts, or hotels of Augé's work, the cafés and villas of filterworld are meant to offer a facsimile or simulacrum of home and all the familiarity and permanence that come with it. Hotels are by nature meant to be comfortable to stay in but not enough to *live* in. The new spaces of Bali are meant to resemble what Augé distinguishes as "anthropological spaces", where people can locate and affirm their own social identity along with other recognizable kin.

But anthropological spaces are defined by a historical richness based on shared communal experience. As digital nomads by definition share no history or experience—beyond being people who travel and work remotely—this too must be simulated. Starting in the early 2010s, new trends in "co-working" and "co-living" spaces emerged to serve young remote workers experiencing isolation and yearning for communal experiences. Ironically, these spaces often reproduce the very same dynamics that digital nomads have fled from—open plan offices, college dormitories, apartment complexes—but now with a (literal) desktop background of the beach, or rice paddies.

Just before I started my Ph.D. program in 2015, I knew of three such co-working spaces, including Hubud and Outpost in Ubud, and Dojo in the still somewhat sleepy surfer village of Canggu on the outskirts of the main tourist drag. It's impossible to say exactly how many exist today, as the industry is still highly volatile, with new additions built every year even as neighboring spaces shut down due to lack of demand. But many travel or digital nomad sites

now collate lists, usually top 10s, with one listing 34 co-working spaces spread across the island, an eleven-fold increase in under a decade (Liman 2023).

Rising in conjunction has been a new cottage industry of "co-living" spaces, essentially dormitories or hotels but with a special focus on "community building". A cursory internet search came up with sixteen such spaces (with names like Outsite, Roam, and TRIBAL), though there are undoubtedly many more under construction at this moment. Kanyi Maqubela, a venture capitalist who invested in Roam, who describes their spaces as offering "a feeling of familiarity even in the midst of diversity" compares it to the experience of attending mass at Catholic churches around the world, adding "we're starting to enter the world where these private companies have some of that magic to them, the notion of feeling at home across time zones in any country" (Chayka 2016). Many of these spaces are also foreign owned. While land and business ownership by foreigners is still (officially) tightly controlled and limited, there are myriad ways of getting around these rules, including foreign-local partnerships or marriage.

We might call this, too, a form of simulacra. Just as the cinematic gaze—with its tendency towards spectacle—transformed Bali by creating a representation of a paradise trapped in time, to which Balinese culture then conformed itself in order to simulate the escapist fantasies of short-term foreigners, now it does so again to simulate home for these lonely and wayward long-term *bules*[13]. But just as home breeds familiarity, familiarity in turn can breed contempt. With the rupturing of the original social contract wherein tourists were expected to come and leave without leaving too much of an impact, the new contract would see foreigners increasingly becoming *neighbors* of the Balinese, who would be expected to tolerate and adapt to these bules'

[13] An Indonesian word for [white, usually] foreigners, common throughout the archipelago but much more so in Bali, which sees the most international interaction. There's been extensive debate over whether this word represents a racial slur or a simple identifier, but most people I know see it as existing somewhere in the middle. Like the Spanish '*gringo'* or Japanese '*gaijin'*, it really depends on the context and familiarity between conversants.

sense of latitude to construct their own world within—or on top of—the existing one. Along with that proximity would come an increasing exposure to the strange practices these new long-term neighbors were bringing with them, placing strain on the limits of Balinese hospitality. It's in this new milieu, illustrated next in the final section of this chapter, that the *Ubudians* series would inhabit.

Naughty Tourists: The Backlash

In 2022, shortly after Bali reopened to foreign tourism, an unfamiliar discourse began to spread across the island, first on social media, and then eventually in everyday conversation. The subject was *turis nakal*, meaning "naughty tourists", with a particular pattern emerging. A video capturing a "misbehaving" foreigner—either created by themselves or shot from afar by a Balinese onlooker—would go viral, and rapidly spread across the island and elsewhere in Indonesia. Angry commenters would demand justice, tagging the Instagram accounts of the Balinese police or the immigration office to get their attention. And just days later, the offending tourist would be summarily deported from the island and blacklisted, unable to return for months or even years.

An out of work Canadian actor and wellness coach performing a naked Maori Haka on a sacred mountain. A Russian real estate developer who drove his motorbike off a pier into the ocean for an Instagram stunt. An Italo-Brazilian artist who devoted eight years to studying Balinese dance before pivoting to teaching her own workshops with a neospiritual 'witchy' twist. A Black American lesbian couple who fled the Trump-era U.S. for Bali, and then sold an e-book on how to thrive there during the Covid pandemic. The individual cases each illustrate different

ways in which Balinese society has experienced threats by foreigners, and demonstrate the limits of their willingness to continue looking the other way.

As we've established, Bali has always had a complicated relationship with tourism. The industry had been imposed on the island from external forces, first by the Dutch colonial government, and then by the Indonesian state. But eventually many Balinese came to view tourism as a necessary compromise in the winds of economic and political change in the region and around the world. By sacrificing some elements of their fiercely protected culture as commercial offerings for a global audience, they would have a chance to ensure the continued survival of that culture, while gaining a considerably higher standard of living relative to other islands in the archipelago.

To what degree that compromise "worked", and for whom, is an immensely complicated question. Like the characters of *Liak Laughing*, many Balinese today lament the slow transformation from a limited "cultural tourism" of foreigners coming for brief visits in specific parts of the island to experience Bali's rich traditions, to a broader "mass tourism" mirroring Thailand, where tourists come to do basically whatever they want, wherever they want, for as long as they want, as long as they're injecting money into the economy. But historically these concerns were largely kept private, with Balinese projecting a steadfast demeanor of gratitude and patience for their *tamu* (guests), even as these transformations began to generate negative economic, cultural, and environmental impacts[14]. Those underlying, unresolved tensions and traumas that hide beneath the original compromise and its failed promises, are now responsible

[14] This is not to suggest that Balinese have been passive to these changes. There are significant activist movements on the island, especially with regard to government land reclamation efforts or large resort developments (Picard 2017b). But these grievances have usually been addressed to the government regarding policy and structural issues, rather than directed at tourists for their transgressions (Allen and Palermo 2005).

for a new wave of criticism towards foreign tourists. The question of why these tensions are now coming to the surface can be largely attributed to two primary factors.

First is the Covid-19 pandemic. Previous calamities like the Mount Agung eruption of 2017 and the Kuta nightclub bombings of 2002 and 2005, loom large in the memory of most Balinese who lived through them, largely because the resulting downturn in tourism, for an economy almost entirely dependent on it, had resulted in widespread financial hardship. But in all those cases, the decline in tourist arrivals and hotel occupancy—while significant—was only partial, and gradually recovered month to month (Rahmawati, Trianasari, and Martin 2019; Gurtner 2004). In 2020, as Covid-19 ground global travel to a halt and Indonesia restricted visitor visas to mitigate spread, Bali endured an almost total collapse of foreign tourism that lasted nearly two years. If the previous events were calamities, Covid-19 was a catastrophe.

The pandemic had arrived smack dab in the middle of my initial fieldwork, and I ended up spending most of 2021 in Ubud, quarantining myself in a small cottage as Indonesia became the new epicenter of the pandemic's Delta variant, pushing the country's healthcare and social welfare systems—already insufficiently funded—past the breaking point. I rarely left the house during that time, but when I did ride my motorbike through the city center, the devastation was plainly visible. Normally swarming with the bustle of tour groups and touters, the royal palace and nearby art market were dead silent and abandoned. Entire rows of shops and restaurants were shut and boarded up with plywood sheets. This included brand new high concept spots launched just before the pandemic, as well as iconic and long-running establishments I'd been familiar with since my first visit a decade prior, many of which never reopened again. Many hospitality workers, laid off or furloughed without pay or unemployment insurance, had no choice but to return to their home villages, often helping out with farming or fishing. Non-humans were

impacted too. The grey long-tailed macaques populating the monkey forests in Ubud and nearby Sangeh, often spoiled with endless cassava, bananas, and other food given by (or stolen from) tourists and their guides, experienced a hunger crisis, leading them to start raiding nearby homes (Lisnawati and Karmini 2021).

After I felt it was safe enough to start interacting in person, I started visiting some cafes and restaurants that had remained open, and in speaking to the owners and workers, many expressed conflicted feelings about the tourism collapse. Putu, who runs the Sweet Orange Warung nestled in the rice fields north of town, told me "everyone is struggling, there's no work, no money coming in, so you have to take care of everyone". It was a statement of resignation and sadness, but contained within was some pride as well. While not true universally, Balinese did broadly take care of each other during the pandemic, evident in the multitude of local government (*banjar*) and community mutual aid efforts to disperse food and essential goods to keep families afloat as they waited for a return to normalcy.

But something else became visible in that absence. While the Balinese spent most of those two years anxiously waiting for tourists to come back, they also became somewhat accustomed to what life might look like without them. As Putu described, "now when I need to ride [my motorbike] to the market, there's no traffic, no buses… the air is clear". Or as Made, a waiter at Indus Restaurant put it, "this feels like the Ubud from 20-30 years ago, the village I grew up in". She went on to explain that she felt "bittersweet" (*pahit manis*) because the closures were causing so much pain, but she was also scared of what it would feel like to go all the way back to 100% again. "Why can't we do 90%, or 80%? Now is too little, but before was too much."

The return of foreign tourists in early 2022 therefore resulted in something of a shock effect. Suddenly all the negative impacts of mass tourism—traffic, economic exploitation and inequality, gentrification—came roaring back at once. Even less severe issues, like everyday cultural misunderstandings or disrespect, now seemed to cause much more discord and resentment. Balinese people were grateful for the business, but perhaps had a starker awareness of the costs now than ever before. Awareness had also been increased around the practices of long-term digital nomads, as without any other tourists around, they tended to stick out more. This was especially true as Indonesia began imposing social distancing and other mitigation protocols, frequently changing but mandating hard limits on occupancy and rules about mask usage. Among the foreigners choosing to live in Bali during Covid, a significant number had experienced these policies in their own countries and had perhaps expected that a developing country like Indonesia would offer more freedom to ignore the pandemic[15]. Add in the prevailing sentiment among many foreigners that local laws—about drugs, traffic or helmet laws, taxes, and indeed Covid—weren't "serious" and didn't apply to them, and it's no surprise that Balinese started noticing a large number flaunting the rules.

Amidst all this economic sacrifice, Balinese now had to watch this new cohort of foreigners living in their towns, running online businesses without paying a single cent in local

[15] It's worth pointing out here an important link back to neospirituality. There's a growing body of research on a political horseshoe effect among new age enthusiasts—often associated with counterculture and therefore far left politics—delving so deep into anti-establishment or anti-institution paranoia that they can begin to be drawn in by far right conspiracy theories (Beres 2023). One major area of overlap has been vaccines, which many new agers were skeptical of long before Covid-19 due to (valid, but often excessive) distrust of pharmaceutical companies and over-medicalization, and affinity for holistic or traditional healing methods. Anti-vaccine content during the pandemic became a gateway to broader skepticism of Covid-19 protocols (e.g. masks) and of the actual threat posed by the virus (if not its very existence). In what's known as the "rabbit hole" effect, recommendation algorithms on platforms like Youtube or TikTok can then exacerbate this, driving people toward more engaging (i.e. more extreme) content, until what started with questions about vaccine safety now as them watching 2-hour videos explaining that a multidimensional race of beings called Pleiadians will soon initiate a download of ancient DNA into all unvaccinated humans, who will then be led by President Donald John Trump to a great awakening and fifth-dimensional transcendence. (See Also O'Callaghan et al. 2015; Ribeiro et al. 2020)

taxes, and on top of all that, choosing to ignore the very same Covid mitigation protocols that had destroyed the island's primary source of income. As Balinese families quarantined themselves in their homes, hoping their efforts would pay off and reduce case numbers, they were simultaneously watching Instagram videos of unmasked bules packed into crowded dance floors at illicit nightclubs in Seminyak or writhing around in tantric cuddle parties in Ubud.

That leads us to the second factor: social media. Yes, it's the default explanation for almost any emergent social phenomenon today, but in this case the connection is unavoidable for two primary reasons. First, video-based platforms like Instagram and Tiktok have allowed incidents of tourist misbehavior to propagate much further and faster than was ever possible before. While most of Bali's economy is connected to tourism, only 1 in 5 Balinese actually work in that sector, and even less directly interact with tourists daily. Therefore, past incidents of misbehavior or disrespect were experienced on an individual basis, perhaps relayed to a few close friends, but rarely reported any higher. Now, experienced en masse, they gain a larger power, exposing Balinese across the island to behaviors or attitudes they'd maybe go their whole lives without viewing directly.

This intersects with the second contribution of social media, namely a forum where Balinese—or, often, Indonesians from other islands—can actually vent their disapproval or anger in public, with the relative anonymity offered by online comments. The socially enforced belief that complaints should be kept private becomes less potent. And when certain influential Balinese like apparel seller and politician Niluh Djelantik start voicing their concerns, others feel permission to do so. In *Demanding Images*, Karen Strassler describes the central role in Indonesian society played by "image events", which she defines as "political happenings in which images become the material ground of generative struggles to bring a collectivity into

view and give shape to its future" (2020:10). As image events, these tourist videos have immense social power, now shaping how tourists are imagined as a collective, but also as individuals, leading as previously mentioned to arrests and deportations, but also to confrontations, assaults, business closures, and government actions—threatened and actual—to limit or ban some tourists.

The collision of these factors resulted in an inversion of the normal dynamic between foreigners and Balinese. In the past, Balinese outwardly expressed only appreciation for their *tamu,* who in turn got accustomed to feeling appreciated. After two years of absence, those tourists have now returned, expecting an extra degree of gratitude for their presence, at the same time that the Balinese are wondering if they're the ones who deserve gratitude, or at least recognition, for what they've given up in this arrangement. Some critics of this new discourse worry about turning tourists away from Bali, whereas others are concerned that efforts to punish individual bad behavior only provide a cathartic release for Balinese frustration while avoiding larger, more challenging systemic problems.

This set of social issues and questions had expanded nationally just as our show was being written, which in addition to making the show now highly topical (and therefore hopefully marketable), would allow us an opportunity to contribute some nuance and depth to a conversation that was only now emerging. Additionally, it could act as an entry point to a larger examination of Bali's history as a tourist site, its role in Indonesian national identity, and that original compromise for survival as a colonial acquisition. And while I wish that this story is one of breaking the trend of foreign representation by centering Balinese filmmakers in the development of our series—the next chapter will explain why this didn't happen—we will return to these themes in the latter half of Chapter 4, when our writing team holds a collaborative workshop with an Ubud-based Balinese film company, Silurbarong.

Chapter 3: *Ubudians* comes to life

Excerpt from the series bible of Ubudians *outlining the synopsis:*

Andi and Lila are an early-30s married couple living in Jakarta. Always seen by others (and themselves) as the "perfect couple", they've been extremely successful, with Lila achieving status as a very in-demand corporate lawyer, and Andi founding a street food app that is on the verge of becoming one of Indonesia's biggest startups. Ten years ago, when they first got married, they decided they weren't going to rush into having kids, instead focusing on building their careers and making money to support a future family. But along the way they've lost track of that goal. They're no longer intimate or open with each other, they spend most of their time focusing on work, and they've stopped talking about having kids altogether.

Facing pressure from friends and family, they finally realize that they need to do something to reconnect and rediscover their hopes and desires for their relationship. This leads them to take an extended break from work, following the path of many well-off Jakartans (and foreigners) to the Balinese town of Ubud, a global destination for spiritual tourists, digital nomads, and those in search of "authentic" Balinese culture. And to tackle their challenges, they'll turn to the strange characters that reside in this town, and the strange practices they use to heal themselves. From tantric intimacy workshops to consciousness-expanding plant ceremonies, polyamory parties to Andi and Lila will try everything this place has to offer in order to fix what's broken inside them and between them. Along the way, they'll meet Indonesian TikTok influencers, a Russian crypto titan, Balinese hippies, and the life coach cult next door.

Through these experiences and encounters, the couple starts to find themselves growing in new and unexpected ways, as they begin to deconstruct the traumas of their past and their hopes for the future. Lila, having spent her whole adult life as a Chinese-Indonesian woman trying to earn the approval of Andi's family and of Indonesian society, rediscovers her own desires and ambitions and begins to long for independence. Andi, after closing himself off emotionally for so long in pursuit of his ambitions and independence from his family, realizes that his big tech dreams haven't offered him any meaning, and that now what he truly wants is interdependence, and building a family with Lila. The question remains: once they've fully "healed" themselves, will they still be on the same path together? Or will their newfound enlightenment tear their relationship apart?

The series will look at their relationship, and at Ubud more broadly, as a sort of microcosm of the strange, fascinating, and often absurd experience of living in a globalized, interconnected, and chaotic age, in which people from all over the world are trying to decide what kind of life they want to live, and how to find meaning and purpose in that life. Not all of the journey will make total sense. Some of it won't make any sense. *Ubudians* encourages us to step outside our comfort zone and ask the difficult and important questions, even when the answers open up doors that upend everything we think we know about ourselves.

This chapter moves further into autoethnography and observant participation, as I detail the start of development on *Ubudians*. In the first section I talk about the process of assembling the creative team, first the directors and actors and then the writers. While the former fell into place with surprising speed and ease, the latter became a much bigger hurdle to overcome. Here I attempt to understand what's been repeatedly described to me as a "bottleneck" of skilled screenwriters in Indonesia, tracing it to larger structural issues in literary and humanities education, and the comparative lack of value producers ascribe to writers when compared with other key creative roles.

The second half centers on our initial development meeting, an intensive five-day script bootcamp which took place in the Javanese city of Semarang. I reflect on my hopes and misgivings about my role at the time, and on what I misunderstood about the role of my co-writers, particularly their inability to take ownership of the project, due in part to a culture of deference to senior authority, but also their own economic precarity requiring them to manage their level of commitment. As we "break" the story with the writers, I begin to recognize how their lived experience strengthened the project's cultural depth and authenticity, but also clashed with the "creative vision" I had imagined.

Directors and Actors

While the prospect of producing a television series was daunting, and especially so in Indonesia, I took comfort in the knowledge that I wouldn't be doing this alone. Joining me in development would be a team of two or three writers, two directors, multiple assistants and associate producers and, eventually, a second executive producer to oversee more financial and logistical issues as I focused primarily on story and vision. Some of these roles were assigned to

Visinema employees from the start. But the core creative team of writers and directors would need to be recruited from the wider field.

Having spent the prior year researching the industry and attending multiple editions of JAFF, I knew exactly which filmmakers I was excited about, I just wasn't sure whether I was allowed to ask for them. In the first month of my position as Showrunner, I was still mostly navigating what that title actually meant and what kind of authority came with it. The position is relatively new in television globally, and in Indonesia it was almost non-existent until very recently. I'd be the first actual showrunner for a Visinema project, so there was no one to really show me the ropes or advise me on where the limits of my creative control extended.

So I treaded lightly, at first. Visinema set up some meetings with a few filmmakers, but there didn't seem to be much chemistry or shared perspective off the bat. When the subject of directors came up in a meeting with Angga, he asked me who I would pick as director if I could have anyone. Thinking this was a hypothetical, I said Anggi Yosep Noen, the virtuoso behind some of the most acclaimed and original arthouse films produced in Indonesia over the last decade. As it happened, Anggi was just about to go into production with another Visinema project, *24 Hours With Gaspar*, which I'd been invited to follow on set as a way of observing the contrast between the more mainstream Jakarta-based and more indie Yogyakarta-based schools of Indonesian filmmaking. So Angga encouraged me to speak with Anggi when he came to the office for a development meeting, and to my good fortune he immediately gravitated to the idea. He found the cultural contrasts in Bali stimulating, and was intrigued by what we were planning to explore. What's more, Anggi had just moved to Bali with his family and was eager to shoot a project closer to home.

Given the gender dynamics involved in our central story, I knew it was paramount that one of our two directors be a woman, and this was fortunately becoming much easier to accomplish in recent years. In fact, the main hurdle wasn't a shortage of woman directors as had been true in the past, but that the most talented and experienced among them—Nia Andita, Kamila Andini, Mouly Surya, Upi Avianto—had achieved such a level of success that they were now too occupied with their own projects. We needed someone on the rise, who wasn't so in demand that we'd fail to attract her.

Luckily, the perfect candidate presented itself with Naya Anindita a young director originally from Bandung. I'd watched her quirky sci-fi romance debut *Eggnoid: Cinta & Portal Waktu* (2019) on Visinema's Bioskop Online streaming platform, but it was her lavish musical web series *Musikal Nurbaya* (2021) that really sold me. I knew I wanted *Ubudians* to be a visual feast, and the biggest barrier to achieving that isn't always creativity or talent, but the ability to utilize both while remaining under budget. As Anggi's director of photography for *24 Jam Bersama Gaspar*, Gay Hian Teoh put it, "everyone in Indonesia wants their film to look fantastic, but not everyone can do it with a lighting and camera budget of $10,000 USD". Naya, along with her production designer and cinematographer, had managed to stage a dynamic and visually stunning production for under $75,000 per episode.

Furthermore, meeting Naya for the first time revealed even more reasons why she was perfect for the project. She had recently gone through a personal experience in Ubud that bore a striking resemblance to some of the show's characters. What's more, the experience with 'healing' there had connected her with the spiritual scene (and had given her some practices that she brought back with her to Jakarta, including meditation and yoga breaks on set). Naya was thrilled, and so was I.

The primary actors also fell into place quickly. For the role of Andi, the cynical startup founder who looks down his nose at the new agers of Ubud, yet ends up benefitting the most from them, I'd always imagined one actor in my head from the very start: Rio Dewanto. A somewhat idiosyncratic leading man, he's had major roles in both romances and action films, but it was his role as Ben in Angga's cult indie *Filosofi Kopi* series that really forged the connection for me. Smarter than everyone, and knows it, often to a flaw. He's someone who can be performatively masculine, while betraying a deeper vulnerability and a growing awareness of his toxic traits. Luckily, Rio and Angga are basically family. Along with fellow *Filosofi Kopi* actor Chicco Jericho, and the late musician Glenn Fredly, they formed a creative collaboration that lasted more than half a decade and was largely responsible for building Visinema's brand with audiences. Angga assured me that Rio would be game (and also willing to work for less than his going rate).

For Lila, the passionate lawyer who strayed from her original social justice roots into the corporate world, things were a bit trickier. For reasons we'll get into later, the character was imagined from the start as Chinese-Indonesian, an ethnic minority with a complex political and cultural history in the country, and often marginalized in mass media. As it happened, one of the best working actresses at the moment, not just locally but globally, is Laura Basuki, who is of Chinese-Indonesian and Vietnamese descent. She'd broken out back in 2010 with her role in *Tiga Hati, Dua Dunia, Satu Cinta* (Benni Setiawan), which won her the Piala Citra award for Best Actress at just 23 years old, an award she'd win again in 2020 depicting Indonesian badminton hero Susi Susanti in a biopic of her life. 2022 was an even bigger year for Laura, co-starring in Kamila Andini's *Nana (Before, Now & Then)*, which earned her the prestigious Silver Bear for Best Supporting Performance at the Berlin International Film Festival, in competition with

established global names like Sigourney Weaver and Isabelle Adjani. Needless to say, she was having a moment. Fortunately, she'd also just worked with Anggi Noen on *24 Jam Bersama Gaspar* (where I'd had a chance to meet her), so with his involvement in *Ubudians* we felt confident she'd be onboard as well.

It was strange how well everything was falling into place so quickly and easily. I questioned whether this was simply dumb luck, whether I actually had some kind of gift for producing, or if the project was truly just that original and enticing. It ultimately didn't matter to me, as I was just happy that it was actually going to happen. But the challenges that soon followed would begin to shake my belief in all three explanations.

The Writing Bottleneck

From the earliest stages of development, I was very aware of the fact that the show's success in both quality and audience reach would depend a lot on the writing team. I had constructed the scaffolding and foundation of a story world and the characters populating it, but I wasn't overly attached to any of it, and had intentionally left open massive gaps to be filled by Indonesian screenwriters. I recognized that, despite my years spent in the country, my understanding of both public and private Indonesian life was extremely limited. I didn’t feel comfortable, ethically or creatively, inhabiting and writing from the subjectivity of an Indonesian. The story bible was only meant to be a prospectus, a statement of purpose that could and should evolve as the team took ownership of it. What became difficult was finding writers who resonated with that purpose, and had the skill and experience to deliver on it.

As it's been explained to me many times, screenwriting is one of the primary creative bottlenecks in the film industry. As Angga put it “you can find very talented actors here, who

could easily be in Hollywood movies… talented DPs [directors of photography], art directors, everything to make a great movie, but without good writers, there's no point… a great movie with a bad script is a bad movie".

I've been given a number of underlying reasons for this, including the precarity and low pay of writing for film compared to other fields like advertising, but people seem to agree that the central problem stems from Indonesia's education system. Indonesia, like much of Southeast Asia, is a historically oral culture. Vernacular literature had played a large role in developing national consciousness among the archipelago in the early 20th century, but its reach at the time was mostly limited to educated elites (Anderson 1983). During the New Order, many literary texts (including novels, essays, poetry, and plays) were suppressed for their perceived subversive nature, especially anything written prior to 1965 (ibid.). As Max Lane writes in *Indonesia Out of Exile*, "History became the rote learning of a mostly falsified story", with foundational figures like the country's most famous author, Pramoedya Ananta Toer, or revolutionaries like Kartini and Sukarno, were largely left out of mandatory reading in school curricula (2023:158–159). While this has begun to change since the post-1998 Reformasi period, most Indonesians I've met describe a continued dearth of literary education.

I met writer-director Lucky Kuswandi in Bali, who explained how this dynamic plays out in post-Reformasi Indonesia. Early in his career he was offered a temporary teaching position in the film program at Universitas Multimedia Nusantara (UMN)—such offers are frequently made to critically or commercially successful filmmakers like Lucky—and enjoyed it so much that he remains there more than a decade later. Recently he says he's noticed a disturbing downward trend in literacy, both in reading and writing ability, but more so on the level of critical thinking. As in most countries searching for areas to impose austerity, Indonesian arts and humanities

programs are being cut in favor of rudimentary skills in order to produce, in Lucky's words, "a nation of Gojek drivers" and other gig economy workers. This conjures the Suharto-era concept (adopted from U.S. political science) of the apolitical 'floating mass', a non-critical, docile, and agile labor force easily managed by a centralized totalitarian regime (Lane 2023:93).

Even within a media-centered school like UMN, the priorities are shifting. Students are allowed to customize their program by taking classes across multiple disciplines, which is good in theory. But this means that certain faculties like film studies can't guarantee enrollment for all their classes and have to cut some. The first on the chopping block are those Lucky places in the "critical thinking" category. Anything involving theory, literary critique, or historical analysis. In their place are classes focused on production skills. What you end up with, Lucky says, is people who "know how to use a camera but don't have anything to say with it".

This mirrored a conversation I'd had with Richard Oh at JAFF about film school in Indonesia. Richard had attended college in the United States, studying creative writing in Wisconsin and California, giving him a unique outside perspective on the Indonesian education system. Most working filmmakers obtained their education in Indonesia, and if they studied film at all, it was likely at one of three schools, Institut Kesenian Jakarta (IKJ), Universitas Bina Nusantara (Binus), or UMN, all located in the Jakarta metropolitan area.

The Jakarta film industry, in his view, has been disproportionately shaped by IKJ, which Richard calls "the school that creates generation after generation of filmmakers… like a factory", repeatedly invoking the military term ABRI[16] to describe its strict regimentation. As in much of

[16] An acronym of Angkatan Bersenjata Republik Indonesia, the previous name of the Indonesian Armed Forces, which during the New Order also covered the Indonesian National Police (POLRI), as well as positions for active military officers in local, regional, and national political office through Suharto's *dwifungsi* (dual function) doctrine. The current name, Tentara Nasional Indonesia (TNI), or Indonesian National Military, reflects the separation drawn post-Reformasi, although the actual lines are often still blurred in practice.

Indonesian institutional culture, including the film industry itself, there's a hierarchy of "seniors" and "juniors" at universities, upperclassmen meant to be treated with respect and deference by lowerclassmen. Indonesians will often speak to me about a mutual acquaintance who happened to be "their senior" at university, and whether they were close or not, always express a feeling of reverence usually associated with instructors or professors.

"A lot of the kids rarely go to school classes," Richard explains. Instead, "after like the first year or so, [the seniors] school the juniors. I'm a director, I need an assistant. This guy, I shoot, they obey me, like in ABRI. Basically they get whacked in the head if they make a mistake. And they obey! Because why? They still respect their senior, like a military commander." Regarding film editors, he tells me that post-graduation "a lot of them cannot even read the Final Cut[17] manual In English, but you ask them to demonstrate how they cut the film in Final Cut, they know all the shortcuts. I don't like that… they can do it the right way, but can they do it the wrong way? Do they even know how?".

I interject that this doesn't sound all that different from how one might acquire knowledge in a typical apprenticeship system, physical abuse excluded (hopefully). "Yes but here's the problem," Richard responds, "it becomes a very singular, and very particular way of making film. Shot, breakdown, shot… They don't cultivate vision, a real directorial vision. They still shoot it like that, how they were told". The footage is then handed off to the editors who, without a clear vision communicated by the director, operate on instinct, assembling the film in the most coherent and clear way possible, and getting punished when they make an obvious mistake.

[17] Final Cut Pro, Apple's non-linear video editing software, is one of several industry standards for film editors in Indonesia and globally, along with Adobe Premiere Pro and Avid Media Composer.

"But then you miss out on what? The focus of the scene, what you want to share, that's the whole point". Richard was not making the claim—as I've frequently heard from successful American filmmakers who eschewed film school—that formal training is not a prerequisite for producing quality films. They were going a bit further, to argue that training is itself a barrier for producing quality films. For Richard, the main problem with mainstream Indonesian film was not, as some might assume from a poor country, a lack of knowledge about film technique, but rather an overreliance on it. It becomes a cyclical problem, he notes, as the audience grows accustomed to the formula and resistant to any subversion of it, adding that, "coming from *sinetron* type of fare into the film, they don't even care. If you ask me to cry, I cry. If you tell me a story about something happy, I will be happy. It just becomes projected into their mind, and they become slaves."

Researchers Zulfa Sakhiyya and Christianti Tri Hapsari, in their work on language education in Indonesian schools, argues that while Indonesia's formal literacy rate is approaching 100%—a staggering achievement for a developing postcolonial state of such population size and geographic dispersion—this statistic belies a significant lack of critical literacy, suppressing the "advancement of reading interests and possession of critical thinking" (2021:169). Their observations echo those of Richard and Lucky, noting that language education in Indonesia mostly focuses on rote memorization over critical engagement with texts, and like Lane and Anderson trace this back to the New Order's use of education as "an ideological state apparatus aimed to curb critical thinking" (ibid.:170-171). This is of course not universally true. Teachers like Lucky do their best to introduce a wide range of literary material to their students to challenge them and open new creative possibilities. But it's hard to work against such a deeply embedded structural reality.

That reality has profound implications on what kind of films get produced. Film is, of course, an audiovisual medium, so there's no shortage of young people interested in becoming directors, cinematographers, sound designers, editors, and so on. Perhaps the one job that sticks out as being fundamentally different, and yet utterly essential, is that of the screenwriter. One has to be capable of understanding and imagining audiovisual elements, but the ideal skillset is far more diverse, best complimented by a holistic engagement with the arts and humanities. This is by no means meant to support an elitist view that only those with a formal education can produce great art, but that exposure to a wide range of ideas, themes, and prior works is often an asset, and is much harder to achieve on one's own.

In something of a self-fulfilling prophecy, it's not expected that highly talented writers will enter the field of screenwriting, and therefore the profession is undervalued. And, as it's undervalued, anyone who does go into writing is much more likely to build a sustainable career through copywriting in business or advertising, which is exactly what many young people do. If there is a silver lining here, this devaluation means that the writers who *do* stay in the film industry largely do so because they're simply so passionate about their craft that it’s hard to imagine doing anything else. This was true for the writers that would end up working on *Ubudians*.

Finding the Team

Aside from talent, we also needed writers who had some familiarity with the story world—that is, the spirituality and wellness scene in Ubud, the larger social context of Bali and its place in Indonesia, and the interconnected themes of neocolonialism, globalization, and late stage capitalism. On top of all of this was the need for bilingualism. Given the prominence of

foreign tourists and expats in the story, extensive English-speaking segments were inevitable, and would also involve a number of distinctive communication styles (e.g. spiritual influencers).

Altogether, it was a very specific niche. And while that should have given me pause when considering our appeal to an Indonesian audience (we'll explore this later), I was encouraged by the fact that most of my Indonesian friends and colleagues were mostly familiar with Ubud and were egging me on to do the show. They were watching and enjoying much of the same media that I was, and wanted to see Indonesian serialized storytelling make a quantum leap into new and unexplored territory. So I knew it wasn't unrealistic to expect that I could find writers eager to play in this sandbox. But it also wasn't going to be easy. My social and professional circle in Indonesia represents a fairly narrow sampling of the overall population, my closest friends tending to be—like myself—upper middle class, educated, urban millennials proficient in English who grew up on the internet, deeply enmeshed in—and shaped by—globalized mediascapes and discourse networks. And while I may have known plenty of Indonesians who wanted to *watch* the show I was hoping to make, none of them were working screenwriters.

Visinema sent me a number of candidates to interview, and in each case—as it was with the directors that were recommended to me—the chemistry didn't match. Either the writer's typical style leaned more toward straightforward romance or slapstick comedy, or they weren't familiar with the themes or story world of the show. In most cases both were true. So I went off on my own, scouring through feature-length and short films I'd seen at JAFF or found online and compiling a list of writers to contact. But I ran into additional roadblocks. Many of the best writers were under contract or "in house" at one of the major studios or production houses in Jakarta or Yogyakarta. This is a rare example of job security in the industry, and it makes sense

that talented writers or directors would leap at the opportunity. But it also means they're prohibited from working on projects outside that company. And while co-productions between companies are common, in this particular situation the profit margins would likely be so small (or non-existent) that Visinema wasn't about to split them with one of their competitors.

So that was another section of the limited talent pool eliminated (along with any freelance writers already occupied with too many existing projects). This left me with largely untested, early-career options, which made me feel uneasy given the complexity of the show, but also hopeful that younger writers might be more likely to "get" the kind of tone and themes we were going for. Eventually I reached out to Anggi Noen, hoping at first that he might be willing to write on the show (impossible, he told me, given his intense production schedule on *24 Jam Bersama Gaspar* and his ongoing documentary project on Voice of Baceprot, an all-female metal band from West Java embarking on a world tour). But just like Lucky Kuswandi, Anggi had taught film classes at UMN, and recommended a former student of his, Gabriella Dhillon, who he thought could be a good fit for the project.

Gabriella (or Gabby) was still early in her career, but had recently gotten hired as a story editor for HBO Asia, developing a gritty female-centric drama series set in the underground mixed martial arts world of Southeast Asia. She sent me over some writing samples, including a brief sequence set in a yoga studio, which seemed to be aiming for the same satirically comedic yet humanistic tone that I was hoping to capture in the show. Gabby was also living in Ubud at the time, and told me she regularly took notes on her daily excursions of things she imagined writing into a show (such as a yard sale ad for a European couple leaving Bali, asking that only "awakened and vegan" people inquire).

What's more, Gabby offered a unique perspective as a mixed-race (*blasteran*) Indonesian, born in Jakarta from Indonesian parents with Chinese and Indian ancestry. Like many mixed people around the world, she often felt marginalized in multiple ways at once, whether from broader Indonesian society, from the Chinese-Indonesian (or Chindo) social circle she'd spent much or her youth in, or from the foreigners and Balinese in her current home of Ubud. It was that same complex feeling of double (or triple) alienation I wanted to explore in the identities of the show's main characters. Indonesian media has often struggled to sensitively or authentically portray challenges of identity, for no small part because the state spent decades actively discouraging attempts to highlight them, or outright prohibiting them through SARA (inter-group conflict) laws. Given the nature of our Jakartan main characters' positionality in Bali—interpellated as locals to the foreigners, but foreigners to the locals—I felt that Gabby's experience could offer a lot.

Through my own personal network, I ended up having a meeting with Rain Chudori, a short story writer and graphic novelist from Jakarta and descendent from a long lineage of literary figures. Her mother is Leila Chudori, prominent *Tempo* journalist, novelist, and television screenwriter, whose own father Muhammad Chudori cofounded the English-language daily The Jakarta Post. For the last several years since the pandemic, Rain had been moving back and forth between Indonesia and India, and had—like Gabby—spent a significant amount of time skirting around the edges of Ubud's spiritual wellness and digital nomad scenes, enough to have gained some appreciation and empathy while still maintaining critical distance. Rain hadn't gotten much work as a screenwriter, but she'd studied the craft in film school at Binus University, and had previous acted in a number of films, including the excellent 2013 indie *Rocket Rain.* And her graphic novel *Imaginary City* gave me confidence in her approach to

visual language and dialogue. Finally, like Gabby, Rain brought her own cultural identity into the mix, coming from a Minangkabau (or Minang) family.

Lastly, there was Visinema's own in-house writer, Ifan Ismail. He was by far the most experienced of any of us, having co-written a number of feature films, often in the Islamic drama or historical biopic genres, most notably a series of films on the life of engineer and long-time research technology minister B.J. Habibie, who succeeded Suharto for a brief and tumultuous year as Indonesia's third president. As a Javanese married man with children, and a practicing Muslim who had not spent any time exploring the Ubud spiritual scene, Ifan's own background balanced out that of Gabby's and Rain's, in that it represented Indonesia's dominant ethnic/political identity. This aspect would come to be essential throughout the writing process, as Ifan could often fully embody the same curiosity and bewilderment that our main characters (as well as much of our audience) would experience in *Ubudians.* His capacity for self-reflection, typified in statements like "as a married guy, I wouldn't pretend to know the first thing about this", often came hand in hand with insight from his life experience ("as a married guy, I can tell you, this part never gets easier").

The Bootcamp

The writing development team gathered for the first time in July 2022 in the city of Semarang in Central Java, where I was staying to observe the production of Anggi's *24 Hours With Gaspar*. Visinema rented us a large apartment up in the hills overlooking the city, where we'd be meeting for five consecutive day-long workshops to hash out the series arc. I had of course already written an extremely detailed draft for a bible, outlining the character journeys and episodes as I'd imagined them so far. But I was fully open to the idea that this was just a

starting place, and I encouraged the writers to come prepared with characters and plotlines of their own without being influenced by the structure I'd already built.

My first mistake was failing to recognize just how strange and intimidating this whole experience was going to be for everyone. Most of the writing and development team were quite young and inexperienced, and Indonesian film—as with most industries, education, government, and society at large—has a hierarchal culture that strongly encourages deference from "juniors" to their "seniors". In this case, I was the senior, despite having roughly the same screenwriting experience as my juniors. But there was also that same authority I'd been granted, perhaps unearned, that had gotten me my position in the first place. I was an American academic, doing a Ph.D. at Harvard University. In Indonesia I often attempt to compensate for this through self-deprecation, highlighting my myriad flaws and shortcomings, which may not be the best strategy, as it can come across as false modesty (an extremely irritating quality, as anyone will tell you after hearing you say "I go to school in Boston").

I wanted us all to be on the same playing field, to take equal ownership in the project. But I wasn't fully aware of the economic realities for my writing team. My position as executive producer had been structured in such a way to leave me entirely focused on creative decisions, with most financial and logistical matters handled by other producers at Visinema. But one consequence of this was my misapprehension of how much this project would mean to my writers, in the grand scheme of their lives.

My understanding of television writing was of course based on the model found in the United States, which has in turn influenced many other countries' television industries. This varies from show to show, but generally speaking at the beginning of developing a new series, a writer's room is assembled, which would likely include a showrunner like myself (who might

also act as head writer), a number of staff writers (variable depending on the scope and duration of the series), a script coordinator, a story editor, and several writing and/or production assistants. That room meets regularly (often daily) for a period of weeks or months, 'breaking' stories and episodes (essentially, developing the big picture collaboratively), then sending individual writers off to write outlines or episodes before returning for feedback. Crucially, most writers for major television shows (or films) in the U.S. are members of a trade union like the Writer's Guild of America, which negotiates minimum rates for their contracts. An early career staff writer might receive $4,000 a week (pre-tax) for a 20-week contract, essentially a full-time job for half the year, with additional residual payments as shows are rerun (an area of major contention during the most recent 2023 WGA strike).

Contracts for film and television workers in Indonesia are structured quite differently. There is no trade union with bargaining power for writers, which means that there is no standard or minimum rate requirement. Writers can negotiate directly (or through agents) with production houses, but their influence over the process is ultimately dictated by how much that house really wants to work with them. For early career writers like those on my staff, their salary is paid per episode, and their contract is not set for a defined period of time, but instead runs up until completion of the "final draft". This leaves them perpetually on the hook for the duration of the writing process, however long that may last, incentivizing them to complete work as quickly as possible while also seeking out additional projects to supplement their income. There's no expectation that writers work full-time on any particular assignment.

This meant that my imagined scenario of a writing staff totally invested in the series and meeting daily to brainstorm, collaborate, and build the best version of the story together was fully out of alignment with their own need to pragmatically manage their time between multiple

projects, none of which were alone providing a full salary. So it was unrealistic for me to expect that the writers would come to that first meeting in Semarang with a universe of storylines and characters and themes of their own, eager to battle them out with each other. This would also come to impact the role of surrealism in the show, as examined in the next chapter. If I had known that this was simply a part-time gig, I probably could have expected that once I'd shared my draft of the bible, the rest of the team would mostly want to go along with the foundation I'd provided, even if only for sheer expediency.

Andi and Lila

That said, there were certain areas that the writers felt extremely confident with, and it was no surprise that these mostly involved the specificities of Indonesian culture. Part of the reason I'd been so excited to work with Gabby and Rain in particular was their unique cultural perspectives. During our initial conversations, both writers had expressed interest in integrating their identities into the show in a general sense, but once we'd begun expanding Andi and Lila's backgrounds, it became increasingly fitting to do so directly with the main characters.

Andi's strong ambition and entrepreneurship, as well as his internal conflict between independence and interdependence, seemed to resonate with Rain's experience of Minang men (and women) who practice *merantau*, leaving home to prove they can stand on their own and make a name for themselves before—ideally—returning home again. That Minang food (also called Padang food) is by far the most widespread and ubiquitous cuisine in Indonesia, found in even the most modest towns in islands far from Sumatra, is testament to the fact that some Minang never return (but do normally send remittances home to support their families).

Minang are also notable for being the world's largest matrilineal society, practicing a customary law (*adat)* system known locally as *Lareh Bodi-Caniago* in which property, land, and family name are passed from mother to daughter (while political and religious matters are handled by men). This in turn further motivates many young men—particularly those with sisters—to *merantau* in hopes of building independent wealth. It followed, then, that Andi's relationship with his mother might be a key element in his character development. We envisioned her as a true matriarch, powerful and traditional, and fiercely loyal to her family—if sometimes overly controlling of it. And her influence (and protectiveness) over Andi would be all the more intense if he were her only child.

As we brainstormed further, the group seemed to agree that the most potent source of conflict for a mother and son in this case would be elopement (*kawin lari*)*,* specifically with a non-Minang, non-Muslim woman. Interethnic or interfaith marriages are often a source of strife in Indonesian life, and are by extension a common plot point in Indonesian film and *sinetron*. But this dynamic can be even more severe in cultures like the Minang, given the complications it brings to their *adat* traditions. This led us to the logical next step. Lila, like Gabby, would be from a Christian, Chinese-Indonesian family. If the two met and fell in love in college, it would be easy to imagine both their families rejecting the marriage, leaving the two with only one option: set off on their own, fracturing their familial ties, and in doing so forming a core wound for each of them, which would be uncovered through the show's story arc.

Originally, Lila's journey was about a woman who had grown up with an activist spirit, troubled by the inequities of the society around her, but had gradually suppressed that part of herself in order to conform to the familial and societal expectations. She'd entered the corporate world in order to support Andi while he was building his startup, and now spent much of her

energy fighting to be recognized and appreciated in a male-dominated field. To be Chinese-Indonesian as well added a new dimension; those social inequities now made more personal to her, and more historically specific for the viewer. She'd have lived through the outward hostility and violent attacks on Chinese-Indonesians during the fall of the New Order, and experienced the discrimination and marginalization—in both overt and covert forms—that remain present to this day. Her desire to be accepted by her husband's Minang Muslim family would become an embodiment of her larger desire to be accepted by Indonesian society. This led us back, again, to Andi's mother.

The Mother Problem

There weren't many major disagreements throughout the camp, so it's very easy to identify the biggest area of contention. And perhaps I should have expected it would revolve around the Indonesian family. The seventh episode (of ten) involved Andi and Lila's families—respectively Muslim Minang from Padang and Christian Chindo from West Jakarta—coming to visit the couple in Bali, and ended up amounting to the largest chunk of time during the retreat, taking up almost two full days (compared to less than half a day for most other episodes) in order to establish everything from family trees to culturally-specific slang and pet names to favorite home-cooked meals.

This of course made complete sense. If I've had anything about Indonesian culture (and narrative media) drilled into my head over the years, it's that family is at the center of everything. Most films and *sinetron* either focus on family issues as a primary storyline, or at the bare minimum need some kind of family component woven in throughout. The idea of a successful Indonesian television show featuring a single unmarried man in his 40s who solves murders and

never once talks with or about his parents and siblings is pretty much unthinkable. Angga even felt that the underlying theme of *Mencuri Raden Saleh*—a *Fast & Furious*-esque conceit where young people are let down by their own families and instead build a chosen one with each other—was a fairly radical statement for Indonesian cinema, and he wasn't wrong.

I'd always wanted family dynamics to come into the show's narrative, but I hadn't developed these much myself, beyond Lila having a deceased mother with whom she had a complicated, estranged relationship (and thus impacting her feelings about becoming a mother herself). The more we explored the backstory of Andi and Lila's elopement and the emotional damage it created for both of them, the more important Andi's mother became. Andi's need for independence in retaliation against her, and Lila's loss of independence in pursuit of her acceptance, would in turn impact the couple's intimacy and trust. Centrally at stake were questions about having children, with Lila's feeling of obligation to bear children (and therefore win her mother-in-law's approval) preventing her from grappling with her uncertainties about becoming a mother, and Andi's devotion to his business ambitions preventing him from recognizing his own lack of existential meaning without family. So I didn't imagine that I was suggesting anything too over-the-line when I proposed that the family episode end with a climax in which Andi's mother, who had directly or indirectly been the primary antagonistic force in both his and Lila's life journeys up to this point, is finally confronted by them both, revealing their character growth. Boy, was I put in my place.

It started subtly enough. We were struggling to pinpoint what the overall structure of the episode would entail. I mentioned that I wanted more visual "stingers" as cold opens for each episode, tangential but thematically or metaphorically connected to the story that follows. We had talked about using a *kecak* performance at some point, and I wondered if we could put it into

this one. We pondered the idea of defamiliarizing the *kecak* by seeing the performers afterwards, sitting outside the temple venue, playing on their phones, smoking, chatting. Just regular guys, highlighting the strange disjuncture of this formerly ritualistic practice merging with quotidian contemporary life. One of them eventually puts on a green Gojek jacket and heads out to deliver food, we eventually realize, to Andi and Lila's Ubud villa.

I believe it was Gabby who mentioned we could intercut the *kecak* with Andi and Lila getting ready for the dinner. Eventually that became Andi, Lila, and Andi's mom each getting ready for the dinner, until eventually it was just Andi's mom. It seemed like a potent image. Who is this mysterious woman, with her fine quality Minang clothing, her powerful and confident disposition? The rising tension of the vocal orchestra, the fire, the wide eyes. Based on visual cues (family photos, plane tickets), we realize this is Andi's mom. And she's dressing herself as if applying war paint. She's coming to Bali. Hopefully the feeling it would invoke for the audience was impending drama. "Oh shit, something is about to go down".

That naturally led me to feel that the episode must result in a pretty explosive climax, a slaying of the giant. I imagined Andi finally coming to Lila's defense and calling out his mother in front of everyone at the dinner. Or perhaps it would be Lila, sticking up for herself and refusing to live forever in pursuit of her mother-in-law's approval. Maybe it could be both! I started to get a bit animated, excited for the drama, gesticulating madly and writing on the whiteboards, until I eventually slowed down and was met with with potent silence. I thought people were just thinking it over, as had happened before, but there was an extra level of tension here.

Ifan started. He wanted to know to what degree we intended to confront this mother, and to what degree we were meant to see her as the villain. Gabby and Rain followed and went

further, saying it wasn't a good idea. This was repeated, more insistently. I wanted to know why. Because, Ifan tells me, you can confront your family more generally, you can maybe even confront fathers, but no matter what, no matter how much you may disagree with her, you don't confront your mother. Indonesian mothers are "depan tuhan", next to God. Everyone else agreed, relieved that it had been said, perhaps incredulous that I hadn't even considered this obvious problem with my proposal.

Still, I pushed back. Even in this case? I mean, she's not evil, but she's definitely done harm to our main characters. All that pressure on Andi from childhood? A whole decade of rejecting Lila, all because of her identity? And we still can't confront her? No. Not in front of a big crowd—essentially a public shaming—but also not in private either. So how do we create a satisfying climax for this story? Well, we can push back, but it has to be gentle. How gentle?

Ifan brought up the recent international hit *Crazy Rich Asians* (Jon M. Chu, 2018), and the fact that the main character Rachel finally “defeats” her potential mother-in-law Eleanor (who has looked down on her and resented her throughout the film) not through direct confrontation, but by demonstrating her devotion to the concept of family above all else, and her willingness to end her relationship with Eleanor’s son if it will be best for him. She wins through grace and strength of character. The writers suggested that perhaps Lila can win by cooking something that meets the mom’s approval.

That didn't seem right to me at all. Lila's journey, as we’d all agreed, was supposed to be about finally being able to live her life for herself, instead of only seeking the approval of other people. How could she do that if her greatest victory against her mother-in-law involved… seeking her approval? We were at an impasse. In the end, we simply landed on her victory being represented by her ability to withstand her mother-in-law's cruelty with grace, and even make a

joke to lighten the room after Andi's mom blows up and destroys the mood. As for Andi's victory? He takes his mother outside, and after she expresses her lasting disappointment over his elopement with Lila, he begins to understand that she was always just afraid of losing her only son, which sadly became a self-fulfilling prophecy. He promises her that he'll make more of an effort to reintegrate himself into the family, and visit Padang more often.

Playing Andi briefly, I add: "but you're going to need to accept that Lila is part of our family too… How's that?" Again, silence. Gabby says no. Too confrontational. "Still?", I respond incredulously, "so what can he actually say to her that can stay within acceptable bounds?"

Ifan pauses a moment, then responds wryly: "Yes, mother".

Eventually I ask if the line could be "but I'm going to bring Lila when I visit, because she's my wife and I love her", and the team finally, begrudgingly accepts this compromise. Not exactly the fireworks I had hoped for, but we'd already spent too much time on this as it was. I made a note to myself that hopefully the director's visual language could heighten the drama and make it feel as cathartic as it needed to be, but I had my doubts. But, as it turned out, all of this debate and intrigue ended up being for naught. Several months later, after endless feedback rounds, rewrites, and further debates on the family episode, I received feedback from Netflix which included their preference that the series be cut down from ten episodes to eight, to adhere to their new standards (which, as explained in Chapter 5, likely developed from user research). We then had to consider which episodes could be cut without significantly altering the overall series arc, and since the family dinner introduced and then resolved so many new characters and plotlines within a single self-contained story, it seemed to fit that definition.

It's always hard to let go of anything when editing down a creative project (they don't call it 'killing your darlings' for nothing), but for myself and the writing staff it seemed even more unthinkable to lose what was arguably the most “Indonesian” episode in a series that largely takes place in an unrecognizable world for many Indonesians. Not to mention the fact that we’d spent so much time developing complex backstories, personality traits, and even speaking styles for characters like Andi’s parents, Lila’s father and sister, all of whom would be removed entirely from the show if the episode were cut. But it was for that very reason it became the first of our darlings to meet the chopping block. It would not be the last.

The Rest of the Story

The remaining chapters explore the process of writing *Ubudians,* focusing on three areas of tension or friction that emerged for myself and the creative team, which reflect broader challenges that I’ve encountered in my observation of the film industry.

The first tension—fitting for the development of a story about culture clash—involves our continued attempts to integrate global and local subjectivity in our storytelling approach. As explained in the previous chapters, Angga and Visinema’s intention with *Ubudians*, and a major reason I was brought on to produce, was to “go glocal” with a story and a style that could capture both Indonesian and international audiences, and speak to universal concerns while remaining grounded firmly in the world of Ubud. A major factor in the success of this approach would be the collaboration between myself and the writing staff. After our initial bootcamp in Semarang, there was plenty of room in our outlined series for the writers to fill with their own ideas. However, as I began receiving script drafts from the writers, I found myself disappointed with

the ideas that were emerging. And the more I pushed back, the more it felt like I was getting something wrong about what Indonesians would find funny, intriguing, or entertaining.

The second tension involves the mediated relationship between content producers and their audiences, both real and imagined. Despite my ongoing concerns about the quality of our scripts, I felt certain that our show would be intriguing and exciting for our target audience, and it was with this confidence that I presented *Ubudians* to three major streaming companies who had expressed interest in buying the show. What eventually upended the project in a significant way was the revelation that our target audience was not the audience our most likely buyer, Netflix imagined in its strategic plans. The imperative to build in more "mass appeal" meant compromising core aspects of the show, and brought up questions about whether my involvement was actually hurting its chances.

The third tension is the most universal of the three, and is one that ultimately shapes much of human expression and especially expensive mediums like film: the balance between art and commerce. Throughout my time researching the Indonesian film industry, whenever I followed a question about why something failed or couldn't be achieved, it always came down to a lack of budget. What is true in Indonesia is true everywhere. When you have less capital circulating around, it becomes harder to justify high risk and low reward efforts like filmmaking. Experimentation, even within an established successful format, becomes untenable. Over the remaining months of my time on *Ubudians*, I was told that for the interest of budgeting, we simply had too many characters, too many locations, simply too much. I was of course prepared for this, but as all the angles were shaved and sanded, episodes truncated, and entire plotlines removed, it started to feel as if there would be nothing left to justify its existence, and I had to decide whether to fight for the original vision or let the project drift into limbo.

Chapter 4: The Global and the Local

It was now mid-July 2022. After five days working as a group in Semarang, we'd expanded the series bible and developed detailed outlines for each episode script, in addition to filling out our main characters' personalities, backstories, and story arcs. The team then parted ways, some of heading back to Jakarta, others to Bali, each in charge of three of the ten scripts (while I handled writing on the fifth episode "The Chain" myself). Along with our script manager Vega, we'd constructed a rapid-pace timeline of just under two months to write, revise, and deliver final drafts for the entire season, with the goal of going into pre-production in September and shooting the series before year's end. During this time, mostly over Zoom, we met as a full group biweekly to discuss our drafts and brainstorm collectively, and I met one-on-one with each writer to give more extensive notes and work through story problems together.

Something I'd made clear to the creative team from the beginning was my belief that the core experience of *Ubudians* was not necessarily the main plotline, which I'd viewed mostly as a vehicle to guide viewers on a safari of strange and surreal encounters with the world and denizens of Ubud, through the eyes of our two bewildered outsiders. I had looked forward to the writing team building out their scripts and filling the scaffolding of our outlines with their own creativity, imagining moment after moment of cultural and existential absurdity layered with acerbic humor and social critique. But as I started receiving drafts, it started to feel that this scaffolding of plot, rather than mere container for ideas, was becoming the whole show.

The second half of this chapter details our focus group workshop with an Ubud-based film production company, Silurbarong, who we asked to read our scripts and give us a local perspective. That experience revealed further levels of disjuncture between myself as a foreigner,

my Indonesian cowriters, and our Balinese collaborators, in turn reflecting friction between globalized, national, and subnational identities and ideologies.

A Note on Surrealism

From the moment I started thinking about *Ubudians*, I'd believed strongly that surrealism was an essential core aspect of the show's narrative and aesthetics. As I mentioned before, I was excited that the style had recently seen a resurgence on television, with shows like *Atlanta* in particular managing to balance its orientation towards pop culture zeitgeist on the one hand and deep psychological excavation on the other. *Twin Peaks* with rappers. The show is just one part of what's been seen as a renaissance in Afro-surrealism, a term originally coined by black power leader Amiri Baraka, who described the work of writer Henry Dumas as Afro-surrealist "morality tales… constructed in weirdness" (Bakare 2018). Along with recent series from Black filmmakers like Michaela Coel, Terrance Nance, and Boots Riley, *Atlanta's* surrealism is about, as scholar Terri Francis describes, "imagining how your interior world works and staying in that place to reckon with your everyday" (in Bakare 2018). Working with the dreamlike and the uncanny is precisely what makes the work feel *real*, as the contradictions of daily Black life are simultaneously so visible and so submerged that "just about any black person is an Afro-surrealist because you have to be able to imagine something more than what is right in front of you" (ibid.). This same sentiment would be echoed to me often by Balinese and Bali-based Indonesians reflecting on the confounding realities of their everyday lives.

These days, surrealism is a somewhat overused and often misunderstood concept in popular media criticism. Much like "irony" often being conflated with sarcasm or satire, surrealism has come to stand in as an empty signifier for almost anything strange, eerie, or

otherworldly. This is partly because it shares a lot in common with other artistic and literary movements or genres like magical realism, fabulism, and even science fiction and fantasy. Where surrealism stands apart is in its preoccupation with the psychoanalytic concepts of the subconscious, the repressed, and the uncanny. Or as André Breton defined it in his 1924 *Surrealist Manifesto*, an approach of "pure psychic automatism", attempting to capture "the real functioning of thought… in the absence of all control exercised by reason" (Breton 1978:122). Like their antecedent dadaists, surrealists sought to critique the hegemonic rationalism of modernity—which many associated artists and intellectuals held responsible for the ruin brought upon Europe through the first World War—by revealing its myriad contradictions and absurdities through the repressed language of the unconscious mind.

But surrealism also constituted a larger epistemological project that aimed to transcend art, politics, and materiality. It was not meant to be merely a style or method, or even a philosophy, but a revolution of the mind, in pursuit of a "future resolution of those two seemingly contradictory states, dream and reality, into a sort of absolute reality, of *surreality"* (Breton 1978:13). Breton, like Freud, was chiefly concerned with the intrinsic (il)logic and wisdom of dreams, and their potential for expressing that which exists beyond the realm of communication or even conscious thought, and for "shifting the contours of both everyday perception and aesthetic practice" (Lusty 2022:11). That surrealism eventually found a perfect home on the silver screen is fitting, given that film is, as Laura Marcus writes in her edited volume of essays on Freud, "the visual medium or 'apparatus' with which dreaming has the most striking affinities" (1999:34). It's also no surprise that one of the most notable contemporary scions of popular cinematic surrealism, David Lynch, has also devoted much of his life to

integrating the conscious and subconscious mind, in his case through the practice of transcendental meditation.

Beyond my personal interest in the dream world, and general affinity for art in this mode, I genuinely felt it was the most effective means of exploring the phenomenological complexity of our show's narrative journey and themes, centered as they were on the masks worn to conceal our desires from others or ourselves, the challenges of navigating intersubjectivity, and the limits of rationalism in a globalized world of super-connected radical alterities. I also felt that surrealist expression was a natural fit for Indonesian storytelling, given the multitude of everyday ambiguities held in constant suspension, from the constant presence and absence of historical trauma, to subjectivities fractured between national, subnational, and local identity. Or represented in a phrase I hear quite often, *percaya tidak percaya,* which can translate to "believe and don't believe", but due to the inherent ambiguity of the Indonesian language[18], could also mean "believe it or not", "trust, but don't believe", or "believe, but don't trust", all depending on the context. But I've heard it used most often by my Indonesian friends to articulate to me their own complicated relationship with the mystical and supernatural. Almost no one in Indonesia has ever told me they that they "don't believe" in ghosts or black magic, and yet many have expressed a liminal perspective in which they're able to simultaneously hold the secular

[18] Ambiguous to outsiders, that is. Anthropologist Edward T. Hall (1976) divided language communities into high context and low context cultures. While there is no empirical model to apply this universally, his general schema found that higher context cultures such as those in Southeast Asia were more collectivist and therefore relied on connotative meaning through shared experience and mutual attunement, whereas lower context cultures like those of Europe were more individualistic and relied on explicit denotation severed from social relations. Reductive as this may seem, the concept seems to lend itself well to Indonesia, enough that it was my Indonesian language instructors—and not my anthropology professors—who first articulated it to me, mostly as validation for my increasing frustration that the language I'd been assured was "easy to master" in fact possessed a near-infinite range of indexical signs involving facial expressions or subtle changes in tone. They also assured me that, when traveling to other parts of the archipelago, they'd often face the same challenge.

rationalist view that these things have never been empirically "proven to exist", while also acknowledging and affirming their own lived experience suggesting that they absolutely do.

Surrealism is also not new to Indonesia. During one of my early trips to Jogja for summer language training, I'd briefly considered focusing my dissertation project on the city's thriving contemporary art scene. One particular area of interest was in what I'd heard referred to as Jogja surrealism or *Surealis Yogya*, a style originally coined by Jogja-based artist and academic Martinus Marianto, who has written in depth about his experience studying art in the 1980s at the Indonesia Institute of the Arts Yogyakarta (ISI, or as it was known then, ASRI). Marianto groups together a number of artists who he studied and worked with at the time, most of whom he acknowledges do not strictly identify as surrealists[19], nor are very familiar with the original theories of Breton and the Parisian surrealists, but have varying degrees of understanding of surrealism's general conventions (1995:144). Instead he groups them together based on a shared set of characteristics which to him signify "shadows or projections of incongruities in Yogyakartan life" (ibid.:145), and "a state of mind constructed by conditions in which people are losing their awareness of time and space, as the traditional, the modern and the supra-modern, the poor and the rich, the religious and the secular, the propaganda and the factual, the past and the present exist side-by-side" (ibid.:140). He describes this juxtaposition in his opening comments:

> "giant advertising hoardings at the Gondomanan intersection, a strategic spot in Yogyakarta, project their messages directly at a Chinese Confucianist temple across the street. Behind the posters is a Batak restaurant with a banner advertising its dishes and their origins. The casual juxtaposition of a poster

[19] He recalls how Dutch curators of Indonesian art have, perhaps unsurprisingly, often looked down the Jogja surrealists, seeing them as mere imitators of the Parisian tradition. He argues that this stems from a fundamental lack of comprehension of the languages of Yogyakarta, not only Indonesian but also Javanese in its various registers, along with a range of loanwords from other regions of Java, the archipelago, and the world. This surfeit of signs leads to practices of wordplay, "riddling and punning" in subversion of official state language and ideology (Marianto 1995:14; Anderson 1990), which found its way into the symbols used in surrealist art, whose meaning is mostly lost on outsiders.

> featuring heroic images of marching fully-armed soldiers with cigarette and shampoo advertisements suggests that unrelated symbols and ideas can exist together." (1995:2)

We can see stark parallels to the milieu of late 1980s Yogyakarta in the writing and art of surrealists in interwar Europe. Walter Benjamin, not a surrealist himself but nevertheless an avid admirer of the philosophical underpinnings, described similar uncanny juxtapositions and unsettling transformations in his own writing at the time, particularly in his *Arcades* project in Paris, or in the destructive wake witnessed by the angel of history dragged backward into the future. In "The Storyteller", he observed "a generation that had gone to school on a horse-drawn streetcar now stood under the open sky in a countryside in which nothing remained unchanged but the clouds, and beneath these clouds, in a field of force of destructive torrents and explosions, was the tiny, fragile human body" (Benjamin 1986:84).

Marianto also argues that surrealism in Jogja emerged concurrently with a reemergence of realism, which had fallen out of favor during the New Order's attempts to "depoliticize" art, manifesting in art schools as a pedagogical emphasis on formalism and abstract expressionism over ideology and iconicity (Marianto 1995:130). The students at ISI learned about Breton and the general notion of pulling ideas and imagery from dreams, they didn't have a strong grasp of the theoretical underpinning of his ideas. "Surrealism's use of Freudian psychoanalysis and Marxism as devices of liberation from the social, cultural, and psychological aspects of the middle class during the two world wars was not apparent to us", Martiano writes (1995:136). Instead, by studying the *form* of surrealist art and learning to draw in the same style, the "aggressively strong images of absurdity and incongruity… must have activated surreal tendencies or dispositions in the art students' minds" (ibid.:137). In other words, the artists were not necessarily making a conscious attempt to represent the unconscious mind, but were just

using the same aesthetic to portray the world around them, which could not help but reveal their own local absurdities and incongruities. Or as Marianto put it, “surrealist scenes are in fact realistic in Yogyakarta. Yogyakartan surrealism is a revelation of the heart of Yogyakartan life” (ibid.:140).

Marianto cites the same James Clifford essay on ethnographic surrealism that had helped inspire my own dissertation, arguing that those surrealistic tendencies are latent in any culture living in one psychological or geographic reality juxtaposed with another, which of course describes almost any culture existing today (See Clifford 1988:120–121). While surrealists were seeking out the “exotic alternative”[20] through increased interest in ethnography and the study of non-European cultures, those cultures were having their own surreal encounters, and those would come to form the basis of how the practice would evolve around the world.

Art historian Tessel Bauduin points out that Jogja surrealism is also marked by its incorporation of “distinctly spiritual and metaphysical resonances” which often draw from “local nature religions, classical Hindu myth or Islamic spiritualism, Sufi, and otherwise”, similar to the ways surrealist art in Thailand and the Philippines pulls from Buddhist and Catholic ideas and imagery (2022:245). This is a marked difference from Breton, who, as Natalya Lusty writes, “had endeavoured to defend Surrealism from charges of mysticism, arguing instead for a dialectical encounter of interior and exterior life” (2022:16). As explained by painter/sculptor Jumaldi Alfi, cofounder of the Jogja-based Jendela collective, "the surrealism concept in Indonesia and in the West is totally different", pointing to the former's juxtaposition of global

[20] For Jules-Marcel Monnerot, a Black Martinican writer and Breton collaborator, this exotic alternative “was a hallucination, an ‘absence become a mirage,’ an expression of everything lacking in the postwar European sensibility, conveniently projected onto the peoples Europe had colonized; you needed the *primitive* to define the *modern*.” (Edwards 1998:84)

modernity with persisting widespread belief in mysticism as a major distinguishing factor (Art Radar Asia 2009).

While it's rare to find surrealism employed much in mainstream Indonesian film—though I recognize the possibility that it's present in a form that I simply can't interpret as an outsider—I have encountered plenty of it in the festival films I've watched at JAFF. Which makes sense, given the centrality of international festivals in "sustain[ing] the formal and stylistic conventions" and "implicit viewing conditions" of arthouse films, which David Bordwell locates in the "illusion-reality" paradigm of representing the real through a resistance of traditional cause-effect narrative logic and an emphasis on ambiguous meaning, inner psychology, and an interpretative relationship between spectator and auteur (2012:154–156).

One notable example was Kamila Andini's *Sekala Niskala (The Seen and the Unseen),* which took the festival's top Golden Hanoman prize in 2017 after winning acclaim and awards at prominent festivals around the world. A rare Indonesian feature set in Bali, it entirely eschews the island's tourism culture by instead exploring the balance between the physical world (Sekala) and spiritual world (Niskala) through the eyes of a young girl named Tantri, who confronts the impending loss of her twin brother Tantra, who is dying in a hospital bed. The film delves into themes of life, death, and the connection between the tangible and intangible realms, as Tantri navigates her grief and finds solace in Balinese mythology and dance. Like many festival films, it balances realism—through long takes, sparse and minimalist music usage, nonprofessional actors, the use of Balinese language and local myths and customs gleaned through years of preliminary research—with authorial expressionistic flourishes—moonlit dream sequences, ghostlike figures, ambiguous imagery, and fractured temporality.

It's no surprise that Kamila Andini's film employed surrealism to tell its story, given the natural pairing of the film's central conceit, the overlapping existence of the seen and unseen, with the practice of piercing through the veil of the unconscious. Andini herself has noted this connection. In an interview shortly after the film's debut at the Toronto International Film Festival, Andini spoke about her desire to make *Sekala Niskala* in order to push viewers to "believe in what they see, but also in what they don't see" (Lazic 2017). Almost mirroring the view of Marianto, she adds "in my country, realism is surrealism". For Andini, surrealism emerges from Indonesia having a culture of holism, in which one is constantly surrounded by a surfeit of spirits that affect one's life but can never be seen. She had wondered '"how do you explain holism to people who don't know it?' And the dynamic between dream and reality is a good way to connect the audience to that concept". In this way, Andini seems to be directly addressing a foreign audience, rather than a local one, perhaps feeling that for people already living in a surrealist reality, this message and its stylistic mode would be unnecessary. To the point, *Sekala Niskala* did not fare well with Indonesian audiences, receiving a total of 16,725 tickets in its brief theatrical run. Reflecting today on our own initial drafts for *Ubudians* with this in mind has been illuminating.

Growing Pains

At the beginning of episode two, "Dharma Bums", Andi and Lila have woken up after their first night in Ubud, and decide to visit a nearby vegan café to eat breakfast and plan out the rest of their trip. In their conversation, we start to see that the couple have starkly differing approaches to working on their issues, with Lila eager to sign them up for workshops and counseling, and Andi believing that simply spending time together doing leisure activities will be

enough to "reconnect". The purpose of this scene is to demonstrate Andi's passivity and Lila's assertiveness when it comes to their relationship (in stark contrast to their career personas), as well as establish their conflicting views on Ubud, with Lila starting to see the value in these strange practices, and Andi increasingly annoyed and eager to get back to his startup life.

Scenes like the vegan café had been outlined with these character and dialogue beats to support the larger arc of the series, but were otherwise left open to whatever the writers wanted to explore in that environment. At our bootcamp we'd discussed a number of things that could happen. The most obvious starting point was the food. Ubud is known for its wellness culture, and is now host to dozens of restaurants around town catering to vegan, raw, paleo, keto, and other "health-conscious" diets. Most of this fare is fully alien to Indonesians, even if vegetarianism and veganism more broadly are not, given the extensive history of Hindu-Buddhist influence in the region[21]. Some of these restaurants even feature plant-based or raw variants of classic Indonesian dishes like nasi goreng or satay, adding further complexity to that feeling of alienation.

But beyond food, any location with a lot of foreigners is an opportunity to insert a moment of culture clash. We'd talked about how Andi and Lila might react to observing a fellow tourist from Jakarta being rude to a Balinese waiter, or a group of yoga teacher trainees one table over loudly singing Hindu kirtan during a cacao ceremony. Another idea was a more dialogue-based reflection on ecstatic dance from the previous night, and comparing it with their own understanding of *kesurupan* (trance) and *kerasukan* (spirit possession). In terms of surrealism, I'd always imagined a moment with an entire family of barefoot European bohemians—mom,

[21] In fact, one of the key sources of protein for vegans originated in Java. Tempeh, fermented soybeans bound with fungal mycelia into dense slabs which are commonly diced up and fried, has been a staple of Javanese diets for centuries, and can also be found incorporated into local cuisines across the archipelago.

dad, and three kids—dressed head to toe in matching white linen clothes, all leaving the restaurant and piling onto a single motorbike together and driving off without helmets, a common sight in middle- and lower-class Indonesian communities but absurd to see duplicated by foreigners. But these were all just brainstormed starting points, and I'd eagerly anticipated what might emerge from the writing process.

Instead, in the first draft I received, the scene seemed to focus entirely on Andi and Lila debating over which activities they wanted to do next, along with a significant amount of time spent ordering from the menu. I started noticing the same thing in several of the other drafts with restaurant or bar scenes. Ordering food or drinks would take up roughly the equivalent of 1-2 minutes of screen time—an eternity in cinematic temporality—without much in the way of social commentary or layered meaning. Just the reading of items from the menu, questions directed to the waiter, suggestions given for other items, discussion over what seems best, and then ordering. My immediate reaction was that it sounded a bit like an audio exercise from a language textbook.

When I brought it up in our first revision meeting, no one seemed to understand what my issue was. The writers had, after all, technically followed the outline we'd all agreed upon. What else did I want? I wasn't sure. Almost anything else. Even if we had to change the location, add or remove characters, move the key dialogue and plot points to another scene. I was flexible, as long as the resulting scene was *saying* or *doing* something. Rain and Ifan explained that this was just a genuine depiction of a common Indonesian behavior, which viewers would find funny. And that's true. Every time I've gone out to dinner with Indonesians, even to a simple tent-covered *angkringan* on the sidewalk serving just a single noodle dish, there's always extensive conversation with the owner and among the group about what's available, what's the tastiest or spiciest version, and different options for ingredients or toppings. In fact, just a week after that

meeting I was sitting at a café in Ubud and overheard a group of tourists from Jakarta ordering drinks from the waiter, enthusiastically asking questions about the different types of non-dairy milk available for the various coffee drinks and their qualities. This went on for more than five minutes.

Later, as I was venting to an Indonesian friend about this frustration, she asked to read the restaurant scene, and she chuckled as she got to Andi and Lila ordering. "I think I get it," she told me, explaining that simply reading off the menu items—spirit bowl, Saturn soup, green goddess kombucha—was enough of a joke in itself, as Indonesians "just aren't used to these things at all". The secondary level of analysis I wanted, such as deconstructing the absurdity of Indonesians paying a premium at a "western" vegan restaurant to eat tempeh—the "poor man's food" of Indonesia—was one step too far. Most Indonesian viewers would find it amusing enough just to know that such a place existed, and relatable to watch Andi and Lila attempt to navigate its options.

Still, while it may have been authentic, it didn't fit the tone of the show I thought we were making. There wasn't any of the biting social critique I'd expected. And instead of surrealism, we were now just doing realism. And at the time, I struggled with what to do about it. I felt that we were missing out on opportunities to go deeper. But I had to continue reminding myself that if social critique and surrealism are by definition constituted within a society, any attempt on my part to imagine *for* Indonesians what should mystify or concern them about such spaces could easily fail to land with them. I had to trust the process.

After several weeks of revision meetings where my feedback frequently asked for "more surrealism", I felt I needed to take a new approach. I reiterated that I didn't need surrealism to be a constant feature of the show. Include too much, and you lose the impact of those individual

moments and their capacity to jolt the viewer into questioning their reality. But include too little, and they become too jarring, an awkward tonal shift rather than a natural emergence out of the overall dream-like atmosphere. I also emphasized that surrealism didn't always need to be communicated directly through the mise-en-scéne—the elements which exist in front of the camera—but could also be generated through creative use of editing and sound design. There's no clear threshold of surrealism that would be appropriate, it was just something we had to feel out. But I knew that at least 2-3 moments per episode was certainly warranted.

I asked the writers to do a "scene tracker" exercise, breaking down their episodes into a grid with each scene numbered and summarized and accompanied by columns detailing its plot significance, character development, thematic argument or social commentary, and surreal elements if any. My intention was to reveal gaps that could help the writers visualize where to focus their creative efforts. While the exercise ultimately didn't lead to the changes I desired, it did help to reveal a fundamental disconnect between myself and the writers on what we thought was surreal. It seemed that the writers had mostly identified strange or absurd events which took place within the diegetic "real world" of the show, as opposed to being a reflection or manifestation of hidden psychological phenomena. One section in particular can help illustrate this contrast.

Off the Deep End

The third episode "Sapiens", written by Rain, involved Andi and Lila attending an all-day couples intimacy retreat with a group of strangers, facilitated by two of their life coach neighbors from the cult next door, The Alchemist and Supernova. As the day progresses through an array of tantric exercises, emotional sharing sessions, and practices meant to draw out each couples'

divine feminine or primal masculine energies, we gradually see a wedge develop between our main characters. Andi's impatience to get back to his stimulating startup life, and his overall disdain for the spiritual practices he views as ridiculous, mask his true fear of being present in the moment, and of surrendering control to become fully vulnerable. Lila's own initial skepticism gives way to open-mindedness, as she gives into the thrill of discovering new parts and desires within herself, all the while becoming less attuned to, or empathetic of, Andi's discomfort.

The episode already had one major surreal moment built into the third act climax. Late into the day, the participants are asked to disrobe to their level of comfort and then draw on their partners' skin with colorful body paint. Andi, at this point feeling like he's simply had too much, walks outside to have a cigarette in secret. When he reenters, he's surrounded by darkness, the colored body paint now lit up by ultraviolet light, producing a formless, alien-like mass of body parts writhing and intersecting in space, with no clear separation, beginning or ending. Somewhere in this orgiastic scene is Lila, covered in her own distinctive colors. She's radiant, powerful, and completely lost in the moment.

Is she being touched by others? Or is she just alone at the center? It's not clear. This is Andi's subjective experience, and what he sees is both beautiful and alien, filling him with both awe and terror. His repressed desire to surrender himself to interdependence, and his fears of abandonment, are made manifest in the form of his wife completely merged with the Ubudians, seemingly a million miles away. This could also be read simply as Andi getting jealous at the thought of his wife being intimate with others. And that was strategic. While searching for our "middle lane" between mass appeal and experimentation, the writers and I had discussed making at least some of our surreal moments interpretable on multiple levels, for casual viewers, those more invested, or even those watching for a second time. Whatever the true reason, Andi throws

a fit and storms out, causing a scene and embarrassing Lila. This leads to a major fight between the two, and they mutually come to the conclusion that their core challenges are not interrelational but rather within each of themselves, thus setting up the next two episodes focused on their individual journeys.

Aside from that climax however, Rain had trouble finding ways to develop surrealistic moments in the episode. In her scene tracker column on surrealism, she only identified two, pointed to the Alchemist and Supernovas' "over the top sensual new age personas" as one example, and "the entire workshop activities" as another. During our follow-up meeting, I tried to argue that these moments, while strange, were actually taking place in the narrative logic of the story, and therefore did not constitute surrealism. Ifan interjected, “actually, it all feels very surreal to me, but I’m still quite unfamiliar with these tantric things”, making those moments feel to him “like a dream, maybe a bad dream”. I was reminded of my friend’s comment about the sheer novelty of watching Indonesians navigate a vegan menu. Humor is subjective, and so is surrealism. The episode remained more or less the same as we moved forward.

Eventually we reconvened together as a group in Jakarta for a week-long script revision bootcamp at Visinema HQ. By this point, we'd received some feedback from our meetings with streaming companies (as discussed in the next section), among which was the suggestion that we truncate the season from ten episodes to eight, requiring some major restructuring. This time we were joined by my new co-executive producer Taufan Ardyan, who would be managing more of the budgetary and logistic aspects—though in doing so would also need to play a central role in creative development—as well as the head of Visinema's in-house scriptwriting team Skriptura, Angga's frequent collaborator Mohammad Irfan Ramly (or Ipang), along with several members of his writing staff.

Having spent time with Ipang during the writing of *24 Jam Bersama Gaspar* (which he adapted from the novel by Sabda Armandio), as well as *Mencuri Raden Saleh* (which he was involved in developing or "breaking" during the early draft workshops in Bali), I was happy to have him aboard, as his experience and talent would be a boon to our revision process. Ipang had been busy with *Gaspar* and several other projects and didn't know much about *Ubudians*, meaning he'd be coming into that process somewhat blind, experiencing the story in real time through our table readings of each episode, almost as a viewer at home might. I was excited about the fresh perspective this might offer us.

At the same time, I was also wary of his approach to writing, which leaned strongly on popular Hollywood story models like Syd Field's three-act structure, Blake Snyder's "Save the Cat" story beats, and Dan Harmon's "story cycle". All of these paradigms are essentially variations on Joseph Campbell's monomyth or "hero's journey" outlined in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces,* which argues for a universal storytelling template beginning with a hero in a state of normalcy before being called to adventure, tested and wounded, transformed through death, rebirth, and revelation, and then finally returned home with new knowledge and power to enlighten others and alter the status quo.

One or all of these are now a standard part of any screenwriting class, whether in Jakarta or Santa Cruz, where I learned them as part of my undergraduate film studies program. Therefore I fully recognize their utility. During the initial writing retreat in Semarang, we'd followed a three-act dramatic structure to outline and develop each episode, as well as the arc of the overall journey across the season. Having creative constraints can help to provide shape to a story when you're not sure where it's going, or what the audience is meant to be feeling. On the other hand, when you're more certain of the kind of experience you want to provide to the audience,

attempting to conform every plot point into the dogma of a specific structure can be limiting, or even self-sabotaging.

The expectations I'd set out at the beginning of the revision bootcamp were threefold. I wanted to rework the first few episodes to clarify and emphasize the central conflict between Andi and Lila right away (for the skeptical/distracted Netflix viewer), then shift to developing our supporting characters (whose personalities and journeys lacked depth), and increasing the overall level of surrealism and social commentary (which I believed could be helped by more heads in the room). The resulting output somehow addressed all three, and yet was not at all what I'd expected.

For the "Sapiens" episode, I'd personally found it perfectly acceptable that the premise be no more complicated than "Andi and Lila attend a couples intimacy retreat to work on their relationship, but it ends up driving them further apart". The conflict would then arise as the day goes on, and the workshop pushes them to open up. Lila becomes more confident in expressing herself, and Andi becomes more closed off and frustrated. Because the truth is, Andi doesn't want to open up. Doing that would cause him to question everything in his life, which he's not ready for. Lila on the other hand is more than ready, because something is telling her she's on the wrong path.

In the context of a traditional story structure however, this lacked an inciting incident, which happens early and sets the conflict in motion. As Ipang asked, "if Andi and Lila both go into this retreat wanting the same thing, how do we [the audience] know what the conflict is?". I felt that simply having totally different dispositions toward the retreat, Lila sincere and engaged and Andi reluctant and irritated, would be clear enough. The others disagreed. Instead, it was decided that Andi and Lila should have competing motivations for being there. Lila believes

they're both there to work on themselves and their marriage, but Andi has an ulterior hidden motive.

That motive? Finding a sex potion.

The Drink

In addressing the challenge of establishing Andi and Lila's main conflict early in the series, the team had identified their "loss of intimacy" problem as overly vague. We'd established them as often sleeping in separate bedrooms, but mostly out of convenience, so wrapped up in their ambitions that they needed their own bed space to spread out their various documents and screens and keep working until falling asleep alone. The problem, as I saw it, was an emotional and relational one. For the Skriptura team however, the problem was sexual, and they felt we needed to be more explicit about it.

Sexuality was of course a core theme of the story. Andi and Lila believe that they should be having children, and their lack of sexual activity is a clear barrier to that. Indeed, it's at the end of Episode 9 ("Tri Hita Karana"), after the two have integrated their own shadows and become transformed by their experience, that we finally see them make love passionately, a cathartic climax if ever there were one. But as I processed this feedback, I realized that for much of the story, I had somewhat pushed sexuality into the background. Yes, we would know early on that Andi and Lila weren't having sex, but only obliquely, as a side effect of their larger issues (loss of communication, and an inability to truly see each other or themselves).

As I polled the room, the writing staff all agreed that the audience needed to know more about Andi and Lila's sexual dysfunction.. This completely threw me. Ipang picked up on this, and wanted to know why. "Honestly," I responded, "this is Indonesia, and I know these topics are

pretty taboo in media, so it just never really occurred to me that we could directly address it here… am I wrong?".

Taufan interjected, laughing. "Galen, we're making this for Netflix. That's the whole point!". Content produced for internet streaming or over-the-top (OTT) platforms like Netflix currently exists in a regulatory grey area in Indonesia, not yet subject to the country's Broadcasting Commission (KPI) or Film Censorship Board (Lembaga Film Sensor), and therefore can theoretically feature more racy or controversial subject matter. As Angga put it, "this is one situation I'm actually happy our government moves so slowly".[22]

I felt stupid. Of course Indonesians want to make movies and shows about sex. They talk about it behind closed doors, all the time. But as a foreigner, it's not always clear where I'm meant to transgress. There is less overt censorship in Indonesia today than there was under the New Order, but this truth belies another, that a significant amount of censorship under that regime was self-enforced, and that this covert form persists today through an array of social pressures.

For example, making a film with LGBTQ content is not currently illegal[23] on a national level, but there's a tacit understanding among producers that such films would be unlikely to be

[22] It's less clear in practice how Netflix will navigate local censorship laws as it further expands into territories like Southeast Asia. The company has a complicated history in Indonesia, having been banned shortly after its local launch in 2016 by state-owned telecommunications conglomerate PT Telkom, who cited Netflix's violent and sexual content as violating the country's laws. Complicating this narrative was the fact that Telkom, despite holding the biggest share of internet customers in Indonesia, was not the only provider, with almost half the country still able to access Netflix legally through other mobile or home internet services. Further complicating matters was Telkom's announcement just a few months later of its partnership with iflix, a regional streaming service in direct competition with Netflix and featuring just as much objectionable content.

[23] The legality of representing LGBTQ people, and indeed existing as one, in Indonesia is constantly shifting landscape. In 2023 a revised criminal code was enacted which now penalizes premarital cohabitation and consensual sex, a move that human rights advocates widely condemned as a de facto ban on same-sex couples, who are prohibited from legally marrying. As of 2024, a bill revising the 2002 Broadcast Law has been introduced to parliament which would effectively ban LGBTQ content in mass media. Similar laws have long been in place in Aceh, the only Indonesian province allowed to enforce Islamic Sharia law.

gain mainstream success due to social stigma, and would likely attract protest and perhaps even violent intimidation by local chapters of religious organizations like FPI (formerly Islamic Defenders Front), as occurred in 2019 with Garin Nugroho's *Kucumbu Tubuh Indahku (Memories of My Body)*.

While sexuality between a husband and a wife in a legal marriage is not at all stigmatized, it's still not considered part of public culture, and is therefore not examined in great detail in Indonesian film. It occurred to me that, if the raison d'être for *Ubudians* was to challenge, provoke, and excite Indonesian viewers with new ideas and questions, then this was a great opportunity to do that. I could abide losing a critical deconstruction of spiritual tourism if instead we managed to open a frank conversation on the issues Indonesian couples face in their sex lives.

Facilitating this would of course require major revisions, but that's what we were here to do. So the team set to work on developing a new sex-centric plotline for Andi and Lila. The revised premiere episode, "Be Here Now", would now feature several scenes of the couple trying and failing to have sex. The first takes place just after one of Andi's coworkers has died at a company party, with both Andi and Lila recognizing that the date was ideal for ovulation, but unable to shake off the evening's events. The second is during their first night in Bali, with Andi falling asleep before Lila can initiate. It's also here that the viewer finds out that both have an internet pornography habit that they keep from the other.

Finally, at the end of the first episode, Andi and Lila agree to join their Ubudian neighbors at Ecstatic Dance, a (mostly) sober daytime dance rave enjoyed by neospiritual types for its exotic "tribal" electronic beats, welcoming judgement-free atmosphere, and an encouragement to fully delve into states of flow or even trance. It's there that the Alchemist

offers Andi a drink, essentially an aphrodisiac, that arouses him and causes him to feel intense desire for Lila. He's suddenly passionate in a way Lila hasn't seen in some time. They hurry back to their villa but once again, just as they make it to their bed, the effect wears off and their sex ends before it starts. In this new subplot, Andi would now spend the duration of the following episode "Sapiens" searching for more of this drink at the couples intimacy retreat (facilitated as it is by the drink-maker himself, the Alchemist), providing a clear inciting incident and conflict within the opening minutes, as Ipang had requested.

I was a little incredulous, and more than a little resistant, to the introduction of this new MacGuffin[24]. First, it seemed to fully violate what I believed to be some of Andi's central characteristics, namely his rational skepticism and irritation toward all things neospiritual or new age. Why would he even believe in such a concoction, created by someone he finds so detestable? That was what the other writers felt was interesting about it; Andi being so desperate for any shortcut to fix this problem with Lila that he'd set aside his better judgement. And in fact, once learning that the potion's effect was just a placebo, Andi's resentment towards the Ubudians would be intensified even further.

This made some sense to me, but I still couldn't shake the feeling that this all felt, for lack of a better word, a bit juvenile. Andi suddenly getting an erection on the dance floor and watching Lila's body move in slow motion was like something out of an 80's sex comedy. "It's all in his head," Ifan reminded me, "that's Andi's repressed libido", coming to the surface. "Isn't that surrealism?" He had me there.

[24] A story device involving a missing object that drives the action but whose actual properties aren't relevant in the end, e.g. the stolen rug in *The Big Lebowski*, or the eponymous statuette of *The Maltese Falcon.*

Notes on a Balinese Cockfight

Aside from the broader issue of cultural authenticity and sensitivity when it came to the overall series and how it depicted Indonesia, there was also the central concern, as detailed at length in Chapter 2, about our representation of Bali more specifically. From the outset, I knew we weren't going to get this 100% right. Ideally, any story set in Bali would be written and produced by Balinese people, and ideally center them in the narrative. Coming in as outsiders from Jakarta (and myself from further afield) was already not ideal. But this is of course a frequent issue of representation in media. People often say they want to see more stories from underrepresented groups, but without access to financial or cultural capital, those groups face challenges in producing (and especially distributing) such stories, often leading outsiders with more resources to come in and do it themselves.

In the case of Indonesian cinema, there have only recently been significant attempts to tell stories from the eastern half of the archipelago, and in most cases it's done by interlopers from Java. In the case that a local can do it, it's normally an elite. And if it's not an elite, it's certainly a man. So, it's kind of a case of turtles all the way down. I had to accept that, at bare minimum, what we were doing was at least better than a completely foreign production (like *Eat Pray Love*). And there were ways that we could ensure Balinese participation in the show, not just in hiring local actors and crew, but also in the development stage as well.

Just as our first drafts were being completed in late August, I came across a film production company in Ubud called Silurbarong, the only one I've encountered that's locally owned and operated. A friend had directed me to a short film they'd put out on Youtube called "Ubudian", which at first alarmed me as I feared we'd been scooped on our premise. Indeed, the short had some similar themes, portraying a tourist couple stuck in traffic while taking a taxi into

Ubud. But given its 10-minute runtime, and its focus on foreign main characters, I felt confident that our approach was unique enough that we wouldn't be stepping on their toes.

I was also impressed with the quality of the studio's work, mostly music videos and short documentaries about local culture, and a particularly memorable skate video of a man in a full-body Hanoman costume (normally seen in *kecak* performances) skateboarding down the streets of Ubud. The "Ubudian" short also suggested further creative kinship, particularly the moment when the boyfriend gets fed up with sitting in the taxi and heads to a street bar to use the toilet, only to find that it leads into a cave with a spiritual guru inside. This was the kind of offbeat surrealism I'd been trying to elicit from my writing team.

As I was at this point staying in Ubud, I met with their lead producer Rai Pendet—a native of the town—and told him about the show and my concern with integrating local perspectives and ideas into the story. He and his team were excited to help, particularly because we wanted to show a different, less exotified version of Ubud than had been featured in previous films, while still attempting to capture the depth and complexity of its culture.

Due to budget concerns, Visinema wouldn't let me hire any additional writers, but they were interested in building a collaborative relationship with Silurbarong, and agreed to hire the team for a three-day script development workshop in early October. The main goal would be identifying areas in the scripts where we might insert additional representation of local culture and society, or where we could improve, deepen, and complexify what we already had. But given how I was feeling about the scripts by this point, I also had a lot of hope that an outside infusion of fresh ideas overall could jumpstart our own stagnating creative process.

The structure of the workshop involved going over our series bible and episode synopses, and then reading through each script together. Participants included Silurbarong co-founders and

directors Rai Pendet and Putu Aditya Nugraha, myself and my Visinema co-producer Taufan, and one of our writing staff assistants Febri, who is also Balinese.

The first day didn't generate much feedback, but the Silurbarong team did offer a few specific bits of Balinese slang and cultural references to provide additional texture. By the fifth episode though, we started to get some more discussion. Centering on Andi after he and Lila temporarily part ways, “The Chain” follows his descent into the rabbit hole of Ubud’s “digital nomad” scene. Desperate to get away from the Ubudians he views as deluded and cultish, Andi falls under the influence of Yevgeniy, a Russian venture capitalist, who gets Andi to use a large portion of his company's capital to buy into a cryptocurrency. When the entire market crashes, Andi’s investment is wiped out, putting his company and his career in jeopardy and revealing his own delusions and cult-like belief in the power of technology and market innovation.

I'd written this episode myself, largely because I'd closely studied the world of digital nomads in Ubud and felt confident in my capacity to authentically capture their particular language and personalities. The episode also included another research interest of mine, Balinese cockfighting (*tajen*). In the third act, Yevgeniy takes Andi to a tajen fight to make the final sell, with the surrounding activities acting as a stimulator for Andi’s economic ambitions.

As an anthropologist working in Indonesia, the tajen is a hard subject to avoid given the still-prominent status of Clifford Geertz's essay on the subject. But my original interest had arisen somewhat organically. I was visiting Ubud in the summer prior to my Ph.D. program and struck up a friendship with a Balinese man named Ketut who I eventually learned was working as a *bandar* (croupier), collecting bets at tajen events. He invited me to come and watch these knife-wielding chickens stab each other to death, and while the fight itself was indeed intriguing (and horrifying), I found myself more struck by the complex microeconomy that seemed to

sprout up alongside it. Aside from the most obvious transactions—the central bets between the cock owners and the side bets between spectators standing around the perimeter—there's also gambling taking place nearby in separate games like dominos and cards. And because these events last for several hours, gamblers are bound to get hungry and thirsty, so a host of ibu-ibu (local women, some of them wives of the men participating) are there to sell snacks like *sate ayam* (skewered chicken, fittingly) and *lawar* (minced vegetable, coconut, and pork), and plenty of coffee and cigarettes. Later in the evening, it's not uncommon to see plastic bottles of *tuak* (cloudy palm wine) being passed around.

Naturally, a significant portion of money is circulated around the cocks themselves, but not all of it as bets, rather as interrelated entrepreneurial services. First there are the *pemilik taji*, the holders of the metal cockspurs, who sharpen and maintain them (and in some cases forge them), carry them to the fights in special booklets (*rimpi*) lined with plush red velvet, rent them out to the cock owners for each fight[25], and even affix the spurs to the feet themselves using bright colored string. There also seems to always be one very old man whose job is to receive the losing cock, defeather it, boil it briefly, and give back to the owner to take home and eat. He earns about Rp.10,000 ($0.75 USD) per cock, but doesn't need to invest much upfront, and has the added benefit of keeping the feathers, which he bundles into dusters to sell later.

The wasids collect and redistribute the bets, and hand over the house winnings to the *bandar*, or croupier. The wasids take a cut, and so do the bandars, who then bring that money to an assistant “big boss”, the ones who arrange the fights, pay off the police, and basically handle

[25] One man renting knives out told me that if the cock loses, he gets nothing, but if he wins, he receives Rp.50,000 (3 USD). Given that they might participate in as many as 10 fights in an afternoon, and assuming that the odds are 50/50, a *pemilik taji* might expect to earn up to Rp.250,000 per day. Which, in Bali, is not bad for a few hours work. The cost of the knives is high; a single pack might go for Rp.3,000,000. It’s an investment, but if you can manage it, the purse will theoretically pay itself off within a month.

all the big organizational work. They in turn report to the big boss who, as Ketut tells me, "sits in a villa somewhere counting the money up", and eventually profits make their way up through an illicit network that extends to Singapore and beyond. Most competitors raise and train their own cocks, but in some cases they may outsource this work to others, sourcing stronger birds from the Phillipines or as far afield as Venezuela, resulting in an international black market for fighting cocks. All of which illustrates how far the practice can deviate from the "deep play" dynamics observed by Geertz in the 1950s.

Returning to the Silurbarong workshop, the team obviously had great interest in the *tajen* scene, given its centrality to Balinese culture. But rather than offer notes on authenticity, the discussion focused primarily on what we should or should not show at the event. Rai initially said we shouldn't show the actual cockfight, just the activities around it. Taufan agreed, saying that Netflix wouldn't approve of it. But Rai clarified that his objection was mostly that it would show Bali in a poor light, which I found a bit odd, given its obvious centrality to Balinese culture. But this feedback was precisely why we were here, so I wanted to make sure we clarified where the limits were and why. As it happened, I had my hard drive with me with video I'd shot from *tajen* events in previous visits to Ubud, and pulled them up on the monitor to

One shot looked at a group of men sitting on the ground while preparing for the fight, holding and petting their cocks. This was fine. As two men began plucking at their cocks' feathers while pointing them at each other in order to agitate them and get them ready to fight, Rai and Aditya both said "no, not that". This seemed like cruel or aggressive behavior to them. As the same shot continued, one of them men pursed his lips and began spitting and blowing directly into his cock's eyes. I turned to the team waiting for them to object, and Rai said "that's fine, it's just connection between the man and his animal". Noted.

We got to a shot of a spur being attached to a cock's foot and tied with string. "Can't show that, it's abuse", Rai says. "And it shows what's about to happen," Aditya adds. The shot continues, showing the spur owner taking another blade out of his *rimpi*. Surely this is okay, as long as we don't show it being attached? No, they respond. It's directly related.

This is particularly disappointing for me. This magical leather-bound book lined with luxurious velvet and filled with gleaming razor-sharp knives is such a perfect, readymade cinematic object, and I can't even show it? I attempt to reason, nonverbally signaling to Taufan for some help, even as I can see he's not as invested as I am in spending all afternoon on this minutiae and would very much like to move on. He suggests, "what if we show the *rimpi* earlier when Andi is just arriving, before we [the audience] know it's *tajen"*? The Silurbarong team looks at each other "Sure, that's okay," Rai says, "because we're not telling people what's happening, they have to make the connection themselves".

As we move through the images, I'm given further directives. We can't show the fighting cocks being stabbed or bleeding, but we can show blood on the ground. We can't show the bird dying, but we can see it getting defeathered and boiled after it's already dead. And lastly, the gambling? Inconclusive. Rai seems hesitant, again showing Bali in a bad light. Aditya seems more resigned, pointing out the fact that *tajen* gambling is tolerated as long as it's contained within a religious ceremonial purpose. Taufen needs to check with Netflix to be sure. We ended up tabling the issue, and the primary feedback offered in the meeting notes was to "limit pre-cockfight detail" along with a suggestion to include some dialogue focusing on the food being sold there, which the team agreed is "the best part of Bali".

I don't think I ever fully got a sense that afternoon of exactly where any of the lines were and why they couldn't be crossed, but that was of course the whole point of the workshop. I

would have had to grow up and spend most of my life in Bali to gain the ability to intuit these things. I couldn't help but think back to Michael Herzfeld's concept of cultural intimacy, which locates a particular form of social solidarity within a "rueful self-recognition" of "those aspects of a cultural identity that are considered a source of external embarrassment" (2005:3). While nationalism is traditionally thought of in terms of pride and positive self-identification with the nation-state, Herzfeld shows how contestation of official state representations of local identity, or feelings of shame over local characteristics, can reconstitute investment in—and identification with—the national project, and reaffirm social bonds. The sentiment of "we can admit this about ourselves, but that doesn't mean you can say it about us", while self-effacing, does just as much work to reproduce a sense of "we" and "you" as does "we have better art and cuisine than you".

The Egg

In the seventh episode, the same one featuring the (non-)confrontation with Andi's mom, we wanted to include some comedic moments highlighting the "fish out of water" dynamic for the two families visiting Andi and Lila in Bali, all the more pronounced in this latter half of the season, by which point the couple has adapted and become more comfortable with the eccentricities of Ubud, creating further contrast and emotional tension with their already more conservative parents.

One idea involved the group taking a stroll in the Ubud Art Market, an assemblage of local craft sellers concentrated in a large complex at the center of town. Andi's mom would stumble across a stall run highly usually by a dreadlocked young European woman selling various spiritual paraphernalia like healing crystals, essential oils, and yoni eggs, ovoid shaped

jade stones touted for their purported benefits[26] for feminine health and sexual wellness. When Andi's mom picks one out to ask what it's for, only to learn that they're meant to be inserted vaginally, she's horrified and immediately drops the egg in revulsion before storming out to complain to Andi. A little juvenile perhaps, but we felt it was the type of visual gag that Indonesians would snicker at.

The crew at Silurbarong didn't find it funny at all. Which of course was fine. Humor is subjective, and that's what the feedback sessions were for anyway. But I was naturally curious to know why they felt we should drop it. Rai responded, "we just don't have that type of thing here". I clarified that this was precisely what made the joke funny; that a foreigner having their own shop in the Ubud market was absurd, and made even more so because she was selling something that *she* believed to be consistent with the "spiritual" nature of Bali, but in fact was totally alien to the Balinese. "Yes, but this kind of sexual thing, this is not what Bali is about", he reiterated. Febri nodded, with a wince on her face signaling her disapproval. I probably should have just moved on, but I couldn't reconcile my own experience with what Rai was describing.

Anyone visiting the Art Market, or the plethora of tourist shops lining the nearby streets, will undoubtedly encounter large wooden phallus-shaped bottle openers and keychains. *Lolok*, as they're called in Balinese, ostensibly draw from the Hindu tradition of *Shiva linga,* but any Balinese person I've asked has conveyed that this explanation is likely a post hoc rationalization to imbue the object with an extra layer of cultural authenticity. When I asked one Balinese craft

[26] The eggs became widely popular in 2017, when Gwyneth Paltrow's wellness and lifestyle empire Goop began selling them, citing the widespread claim that the practice had originated in ancient China. A subsequent study from the *Female Pelvic Medicine & Reconstructive Surgery* journal co-authored by an obstetrician/gynecologist and an archaeologist found no evidence that vaginal jade eggs had ever been used in ancient Chinese culture. Goop was later sued for making false, unscientific claims about the eggs' benefits for hormone and menstrual regulation (See Gunter and Parcak 2019).

seller if he resonated with the origin story, he laughed and assured me it was essentially just a 'gag gift' for embarrassing your friends.

Whether or not the *lolok* can be traced back to a traditional spiritual origin, its current vulgar manifestation has clearly been decoupled entirely, for the purpose of attracting the eye of foreign tourists with the same erotic/exotic allure of the *Goona-Goona* films. And venturing further south to the dense, rowdy backpacking tourist area of Kuta Beach, the souvenirs become even more risqué; bumper stickers and t-shirts laced with profanity, racism, and homophobia, and bearing references to sex tourism, illegal drugs, and STDs (all with a smattering of highly specific Australian slang).

Obviously I can understand why Rai would feel less than thrilled about bringing attention to these aspects of Balinese life, given that they've emerged in the last century mostly due to the dictates of global capitalism. But again, this was a central argument of the show, and the meaning behind moments like the yoni egg interaction. The whole point was to bring attention to the ways in which the desires of foreigners come to shape the lifeworld of the Balinese, through an absurdly literal representation of this phenomenon in action. I reiterated that the show was mostly for an Indonesian audience, and that we'd heighten the surrealist atmosphere of the scene to make it clear that this was meant to be an exaggeration of reality. But I wasn’t persuasive. Adiyta agreed with Rai, saying that it was important to not give "a negative impression of Bali" which might inspire people to "come here looking for these things". Ultimately my colleagues from Visinema agreed with the objections from Silurbarong, and we scrapped the yoni egg, moving on to the next episode.

As vindication of their point, or perhaps of mine, recently a friend in Ubud who I’d previously relayed this incident to, sent me a photo from the 2024 Bali Spirit Festival, a large

annual music and arts gathering held at the town's long-running institution The Yoga Barn. It showed a craft stand run by a Mexican woman selling locally-produced "Balinese" spiritual objects, including quartz face rollers, obsidian massage wands, and, most prominently, a collection of jade yoni eggs. Sometimes life imitates art before the art has a chance to exist.

Permission to Deconstruct

I was more than comfortable relenting on the egg issue, as it wasn't actually a hill that I needed to die on. I'd never loved the gag to begin with, and always imagined we'd come up with something more incisive or clever (though we were unable to do so in that meeting). I'd mostly just wanted to understand why a scene depicting the strange culture and gentrifying force of foreigners as comedic foil and object of criticism could be seen as offensive or damaging to the Balinese. Why wouldn't they enjoy laughing at it?

Perhaps what I'd missed was the way in which this commentary about neocolonialism and spiritual artifice could be read as implicating the Balinese, as it would seem to suggest that they could actually tolerate such an incursion. We had imagined the scene as being absurd and over-the-top, but for the Silurbarong crew, it actually wasn't absurd enough. Instead, we'd ended up in something of an uncanny valley, where the incident described bore too much resemblance to an uncomfortable reality to function as a thought experiment.

Reflecting on the workshop in the weeks that followed, I began to understand that my broader intention for the series to deconstruct the cultural myths and representations of Bali imagined by foreigners could also be received poorly by Balinese people whose identities are now complexly interwoven and enmeshed with those myths and representations. This returns me again to the concept of cultural intimacy, along with Benedict Anderson's theory of national

identity formation. Subnationalism can often operate in the same ways that nationalism does. Prior to the 20th century, there was no sense of a singular "Balinese culture", just as there was no singular Balinese language. The island was split between a number of kingdoms, each with their own local language, customs, and culture. It wasn't until the Indonesian independence movement was underway that Bali found it necessary to unite and articulate itself as island-wide community, largely out of the imperative to maintain some level of autonomy within a nascent state whose power base in Java would soon have the potential to dominate its small neighbor. Yet another compromise was struck.

Gradually Bali's internal contradictions and variations were flattened into a unified identity that was repackaged as ancient and eternal. As Michel Picard writes, the "alleged indivisible unity of religion, tradition, and culture, by which the Balinese define their identity nowadays, far from expressing a primordial essence as they would have it, is the outcome of a process of semantic borrowing and conceptual recasting they have had to make in response to the colonization, the Indonesianization, and the touristification of their island". (Picard 2017a:17). I'm always careful to mention any of this to Balinese people, as it's obviously laden with a lot of colonial trauma. But in times that it has come up, I've had Balinese people tell me that I'm wrong, that whatever history I've read is incorrect. Bali has always been Bali. And I don't argue, because I understand that national identity, and often subnational identity in the case of places like Bali, cannot tolerate ambiguity, at least when dealing with foreign interlopers. It's entirely possible that these same Balinese might recognize these contradictions, or identify some of their own, when among family and their local community.

But I am neither of those things. In these moments I'm essentially standing in for a global power structure and hierarchy of value, which determines which societies are legitimate and

which are not, and though I may try to soften my language, it may feel as if by deconstructing myths, I'm placing Bali or Indonesia in the "illegitimate" category. And any attempt on my part to ameliorate this effect by turning it back onto myself and pointing out all the glaring contradictions and illegitimacy of my own nation-state, might only make things worse.

As an anthropologist, and I suppose as an artist, I'm inherently drawn to practices of deconstruction. Not everyone is. In fact, I would wager probably very few people outside the academy wish to have their social world and metanarratives deconstructed, certainly least of all by an outsider. This is frequently revealed to me in daily interactions with Balinese people who, after learning how long I've been come to Indonesia and how many islands I've visited, will then normally ask me to offer my comparative appraisal of their island, asking "bagaimana budaya Bali, menerut kamu?" ("what's your opinion of Balinese culture?").

This question has in the past made me a bit flustered, not because I'm scared to say something offensive, but because as an anthropologist (and likely due to neurodivergence), my brain often cannot help but parse the question out to a subatomic level, considering what indeed constitutes "Balinese culture", who and what gets included in that category, which dimensions ought to be evaluated (social, political, artistic, interpersonal), and what kind of criteria I would even use to do so. This leads to me providing a string of almost comically disappointing answers to the warung owner or taxi driver who—now regretting asking me in the first place—listens patiently as I pontificate on the symmetry of Bali's intra-island fusion of various kingdoms to the inter-island fusion involved in creating the Indonesian nation-state, struggling to land a single declarative statement.

Eventually I give up and revert to the preferred answer: "the Balinese are very friendly and welcoming and have a wonderful culture", which naturally received much more warmly.

Based on the amount of times I've had this conversation, and the fact that there's seemingly one right answer, this can feel like a kind of ritualistic convention without any real stakes. But I get the feeling that people do need to hear the response. The confirmation that they are in fact what they've been marketed as seems to be genuinely validating and heartening. *We've still got it*. Even less successful are my attempts to form solidarity with Balinese by contrasting their friendliness with the comparative selfishness or misbehavior of tourists that come here. Nyoman Putra confirms this experience, nothing that such overtures violate the "intricate codes of hospitality, regulated by society, religion and culture, [which] prevent many Balinese from openly questioning the value of their many 'guests'" and "are often rebuffed with smiling assurances: the Balinese love tourists and are pleased to welcome them" (2012a:205).

Ultimately I left our workshop with Silurbarong feeling a bit frustrated with our output, but we'd nonetheless had a number of stimulating and enlightening conversations that helped me further understand the challenges of creating art in a multicultural collaborative space. My earnest intentions to provide a narrative space to challenge and deconstruct popular myths and representations of Bali instead generated discomfort and embarrassment among my collaborators. After months of frustrations with the scripts we were producing, I was starting to question whether the problem was in the writing, or in me. I had believed that my research into Indonesian culture and history, and my years of immersion in Indonesia, would be sufficient enough for me to transcend my own habitus and co-create this common field. Instead, it felt as if we were all trying to meet in a middle space where none of us would be fully satisfied.

Chapter 5: The Producer and the Audience

Despite my concerns about the quality of the writing, I nevertheless remained extremely confident in the show's overall concept. I knew that we were producing something totally unique and without precedent in Indonesian media, which had the potential to create a lot of buzz, and capture a wide range of viewers both inside and outside the country. I was also feeling very confident in my ability to sell the show, particularly after successfully getting so much top talent onboard. The next milestone would involve pitching to the three major streaming platforms competing for the Southeast Asian market: Netflix, Amazon Prime, and Disney Hotstar. I imagined that the sheer quantity of original ideas would easily carry across in a meeting with development executives, who would find my enthusiasm irresistibly infectious. The three meetings were, instead, a giant bucket of ice cold water dumped on my head.

Hello, Netflix

The actual preparation for the meetings had been fairly minimal. Visinema's marketing team had produced a slick-looking pitch deck based on the series bible, including slides on the cultural context in Bali, detailed episode summaries and character biographies, potential cast members, and of course my original mind map, which Angga insisted on using as marketing material. Overall, the deck came in at 66 pages, and the meetings were only 45 minutes, which meant very little time to cover anything at length. Given that the responsibility fell on me as showrunner to present at the pitch meetings, I consulted with Visinema's business team on the best way to approach this. I'd proposed spending more time covering the themes of the show and engaging the executives in conversations, but I was told that it would be better to simply describe

the story, characters, and episodes in as much detail as possible, so they'd have a sense of what we were going for. Looking back, I'm not sure that was the right call.

With the limited time, this meant breezing through at breakneck speed, taking a few minutes to introduce myself and my background, a few more to explain the background context and our main concept, and then about 90 seconds each to describe the plot points and thematic significance of the 10 hour-long episodes. I rehearsed this about ten times the day prior to the first meeting, gradually cutting my speaking time down to under 30 minutes (while starting to seriously doubt in my capacity for brevity). By the end of the night I'd nearly lost my voice. This approach also didn't make for the most dynamic performance, with my self-imagined charisma and showmanship not exactly shining through at 1.5x speaking speed. But I was assured that this was the way it was done.

Another challenge was the fact that the meetings were conducted over Zoom. While Netflix has an Indonesia office, they rarely take pitch meetings there, and in this case their head of development was out of the country anyway. In the case of Disney and Amazon, their regional offices are outside of Indonesia, based in Kuala Lumpur and Singapore, respectively. As much as we've all tried to pretend—and this was especially true early in the pandemic—that Zoom is an adequate replacement for in-person communication, it simply is not the case. Attentive capacity is diminished, social cues are hard to pick up on, and there's a certain sense that there's just less importance to whatever's going on. Events meant to carry great weight or gravitas, like accepting an award, giving a commencement speech or keynote lecture, or becoming a major political party's candidate for president, seem to carry an implicit asterisk noting that it did not take place in person. And events that already had the potential to be less than thrilling, like a weekly budget review meeting, became even less so. Early pandemic enthusiasm for funky backgrounds and

filters soon gave way to a wall of black screens, as people preferred to keep their screen off, allowing them to multitask in their pajamas, or tune out altogether.

In our case, we at least had some people on screen to interact with, if not necessarily that engaged. In Amazon's case, there were three people sitting in a small conference room at the beginning, but as I was presenting, one left the room, followed by another, leaving only one person watching me for the vast majority of my pitch. For the Disney meeting, despite all my efforts to keep my presentation brief to allow for interaction and feedback at the end, there wasn't much of any. The representatives thanked us, and it was over. But worse yet, any feedback we did receive was not encouraging. For Amazon, the first question became the one I would hear most frequently throughout the week: "Who is the audience for this?". The Disney reps asked the same thing, and also wanted to know if this was a comedy or a drama (seemingly unaware that almost everything on television today is a mix of both). Netflix was the most effusive of the three, in that they were at least somewhat enthusiastic about what we were doing, but nonetheless expressed the same concern: "It seems very… niche. I'm wondering if there's a mass appeal here".

Mass Appeal

Given the originality of the project, this question had of course occurred to me from the start. Most of Indonesian television is dominated by *sinetron* (from *sinema elektronik),* microbudget telenovela-style soap operas often shot, edited, and broadcast within a single day, and filled to the brim with scandalous affairs and inheritance battles, good women and evil stepmothers, and often structured as an Islamic morality tale in which the unambiguous heathen

violently meets their *azab* (doom) in the end. I felt confident that we could find our audience, but this depended on three key assumptions that turned out to be fundamentally flawed.

The first assumption was that the project would be an easy sell, due to sheer demand. During the early stages of developing *Ubudians*, Angga and other producers at Visinema had explained to me that we were currently in a "seller's market" for content in Southeast Asia. In the world of over-the-air (OTT) or streaming platforms, a Great Game was taking place to divide up the planet into subscriber base territories. Europe and Latin America had largely been captured by Netflix. The U.S. was now saturated by a veritable deluge of streaming services, but also a major subscriber base for Netflix and Amazon Prime (partly due to video content being included in its 2-day delivery subscription). Southern Africa had adopted the South African Showmax, the Francophone countries opting for Canal+ Afrique, and the MENA region now claimed by the Saudi platform Shahid. China was committed to its own Tencent Video service, and Disney+ Hotstar had poured immense resources into claiming the top spot in India. Southeast Asia remained the last "frontier" of uncommitted potential subscribers. Nearly a billion people rising in economic prosperity, many with just enough disposable income to warrant an $8/month streaming subscription.

When Angga approached me to develop *Ubudians* at the start of 2022, the streaming giants were still coasting off the financial tailwinds of the Covid-19 pandemic. In a convergence of world events so dystopian they almost demand to become a conspiracy theory (or at least a *Black Mirror* episode), billions of people went through varying degrees of lockdown just as a plethora of streaming platforms were buying their way into the market, including Disney+, Apple TV, Paramount+, and HBO Max. Major tech companies like Amazon and Apple doubled their stock value and brought a sudden influx of capital into the global entertainment industry.

By 2022, the number of scripted series made in the United States had risen above 600 a year, a massive increase from 210 network and cable series at the end of the 2000s, just before the streaming era began (Koblin 2024). People started to use the term "peak TV" to describe the unprecedented amount of titles being produced.

These platforms were burning through billions of dollars to build up their exclusive content libraries, which seemed necessary during this initial knife fight for market share, but would never be sustainable in the long run. So aside from constituting an attractive high-population potential subscriber base, Indonesia was also best positioned among Southeast Asian countries to produce more of that content, given the film industry's high rate of output and inexpensive production costs. From Angga's point of view, we could present almost anything to these platforms and trigger a bidding war, so why not go big and bring them something groundbreaking and out of left field?

But the economics of global streaming content lie at the intersection of technology, entertainment, and speculative finance—three highly volatile industries—and thus are highly susceptible to shifts in prevailing winds. By the time we were getting ready to pitch the show, the market was suddenly looking a lot different. In April 2022, Netflix reported a first-ever decline in subscribers, and along with Amazon and Disney, saw their stocks plummet over the summer from their late 2021 highs. While they've since rebounded, the crisis triggered a panic among investors and a reevaluation of the entire economic model, with platforms raising subscription prices, introducing new advertising-based tiers, and, crucially, cutting back on new productions (Aquilina 2024). While business was still booming, it was beginning to feel like the gold rush was coming to an end, and it was in this less bullish atmosphere that we found ourselves pitching our risky new experiment.

The second assumption was that *Ubudians*, as Angga and I had discussed early on, would have a "glocal" perspective. This was of course one of the primary reasons for bringing me on to produce it in the first place. While the show's topics, themes, and aesthetics would indeed be somewhat niche both in the Indonesian and global context, a combination of niche viewers from both could ensure a decent crossover success, and provide the added benefit of giving a gateway for Indonesian viewers to explore more offbeat shows, and for global viewers to explore more Indonesian shows.

Unfortunately, this strategy did not align with that of the streamers. While I wasn't able to learn this directly from Amazon or Disney, the Netflix team did help me understand in a follow-up meeting. This may go without saying, but Netflix does not need content from Southeast Asia to attract or retain subscribers in North America, Europe, or other regions. They have more than enough high budget films and series being produced in those regions, and when it comes to acquiring foreign titles, they have much more confidence in highly developed film industries like South Korea's. This is especially true after *Squid Game* (2021) drew in more than a hundred million American viewers, becoming Netflix's most-watched program ever, earning them $891 million in "impact value"[27] on a miniscule (by Hollywood standards) $21 million budget (Spangler 2021).

Our show was certainly no *Squid Game,* given that even our most ambitious budget estimates were less than one-tenth of theirs, and that *Squid Game* was a suspense thriller with imminent death around every corner, making our own existential comedy-drama much lower stakes by comparison. There's also the relative obscurity of Indonesian culture compared to

[27] As streaming services like Netflix are subscription-based, success of an individual title can't be measured in sales, and therefore require developing proprietary metrics like "impact value", based on the number of viewers and viewing hours, and likely factoring in regional subscription costs and new subscriber rates.

South Korea, which through the combination of K-dramas (Korean soap operas), K-pop like megastar boy band BTS, and films like *Parasite*, have led to a well-established foothold around the world. But *Squid Game* also navigated this smartly, setting the entire show in an isolated environment where even the characters are alienated from their social and cultural context, allowing international viewers to take the journey with them with very little friction aside from the language, which a majority of viewers resolved by choosing dubbing over subtitles. *Ubudians* would be a much more specific (aka "niche") show. Someone watching would hopefully possess at least a cursory amount of information on Indonesia and Bali, and have at least a base familiarity with, if not necessarily an interest in, certain tropes of the wellness industry or new age spirituality. Enough at the very least to enjoy watching a send-up of these things. And given the recent success of shows with similar themes like *The White Lotus* and *Nine Perfect Strangers,* I was convinced that there was an audience for this split between Indonesia and the U.S. But the latter didn't factor into Netflix's plans for Indonesian-produced content.

This was where our third flawed assumption comes in. When I was researching and developing *Ubudians,* I'd spoken about it with nearly everyone I knew in Indonesia at the time, whether in Java or Bali, in the film industry or otherwise. Many people had loved the idea of the project, telling me "we need more stuff like this". Some would even hear my pitch of "*Atlanta* set in Bali" and immediately light up, begging me to see it through. And even those who resonated less directly with the concept assured me that they'd be excited to see something so unconventional and fresh produced in Indonesia.

Of course, I recognized that most of my connections came from a narrow subset of Indonesian society. Educated, highly online upper middle class millennials from urban centers in Java or Bali, most of whom had traveled abroad and/or spent much of their formative years

watching entertainment from around the world. This probably describes, at most, a couple million Indonesians. But it also occurred to me that Netflix only had around 2-3 million Indonesian subscribers, and that the overlapping Venn diagram between their base and our potential audience was likely very close to a single circle.

If I'd been offered an opportunity to produce a microbudget *sinetron* for RCTI (Indonesia's public television channel) to be viewed by millions of middle class Indonesians spread across the archipelago, I'd find it a very strange choice to include me, but I would nevertheless do my best to appeal to those viewers and take into account their likely range of experiences, interests, taste, and knowledge. But with Ubudians, I'd accepted that I was essentially making art for cosmopolitan elites. Or so I thought.

When I responded to the Netflix question about mass appeal by bringing up the fact that our target audience—the aforementioned urban millennials raised on global media and the internet—was the same as their own, the development executive nodded and agreed. "Yes, that's exactly true", he said. "But right now we feel secure about retaining that segment. What we're looking for now is aggressive growth, which means pulling in new viewers, especially B and C class". In Indonesian media and marketing parlance, these classes (A through D) refer to subdivided economic and regional groups, with A representing the aforementioned sliver of wealthier urbanites, and C representing middle income audiences who make up the majority of the television audience (Rakhmani 2014:444–445).

What I didn't know in late 2022 (and which probably would have helped with the sting of rejection from Amazon and Disney), was that the other streaming platforms were already wavering in their ambitions to penetrate the Indonesian market and getting ready to give up on

the Great Game.[28] But Netflix knew. And without competition at the top, Netflix did not need to produce content to retain their existing higher income Indonesian viewers—who were mostly interested in the same content as their global viewers—but now sought to expand to middle to lower income Indonesians in smaller cities and towns.

To Netflix's credit, they didn't exactly slouch or try to appeal to the lowest common denominator. They've aggressively sought out A-list filmmakers like Joko Anwar and Kamila Andini to write and direct original series, respectfully the supernatural sci-fi horror *Nightmares and Daydreams* and lush period drama *Gadis Kretek (Cigarette Girl),* the latter of which is inarguably Andini's most high-profile project yet, viewed over 5 million times in the two months after its November 2023 debut (Netflix 2024). In some ways, these projects represented the very middle space we'd strived to achieve, though they hadn't yet come out at the time to offer us inspiration and motivation.

We'd left the Netflix meeting with a "good news/bad news" situation. On the one hand, the development executives had expressed their interest in buying the show and were eager to read the full bible along with our scripts. On the other hand, those scripts would now need to be recrafted first to meet their demands for wider appeal. This would mean broadening the taste pallet of *Ubudians* in terms of both content and style in order to connect with the mainstream audience Netflix was seeking, the exact opposite of our admittedly niche approach. At the same time it also meant narrowing our range of addressee. There was no longer any need to "glocalize" this project, as global viewers were no longer a factor. Many of my own interests in

[28] After a splashy 2022 preview of planned original content from top filmmakers like Joko Anwar and Kamila Andini, Amazon Prime only put out one program, the improv reality show *Comedy Island*, before closing their Southeast Asian originals division in 2024. Disney Hotstar has had a more successful track record, but my colleagues at Visinema have told me that the company is reducing its own investment too, effectively ceding the region to Netflix.

deconstructing Western fantasies of Bali, or critiquing the neospiritual ideologies, seemed less needed than ever.

I'd already started doubting my choices as a producer as I began sensing the mismatch in taste between myself and the rest of the creative team, but after factoring in this wider Indonesian audience, it occurred to me that my entire approach to the show might be wrong. While I had been spending most of my energy for six months trying to pull the project to what I believed to be a middle compromise between myself and my co-creators, it was now clear that this middle point was actually way too far outside of Netflix's ambitions. Adopting the political spectrum "Overton window" as a metaphor, it's as if what I thought was a moderate center-right position in my own context was now considered far-left extremism, and I would now have to adjust my entire orientation to find the new middle.

Going Mainstream

In his book *Indonesian Cinema after the New Order,* Thomas Barker applies Stuart Hall's application of Gramscian "articulation" to describe the process through which cultural products like film become part of mainstream culture (2020:20). This description is necessary, he argues, because "we often come to see mainstream pop culture as already operating, rather than seeing it take shape and develop as it has in Indonesia over the past ten to fifteen years" (ibid.:21). What Barker is referring to is the remarkable resurgence of Indonesian cinema in the mid-2000s, after a decade in which film production declined to its lowest point since World War II, with only seven films made domestically in 1999. There were a number of causes for this shift, which one after another created a snowball effect. Widespread adoption of television, government censorship, and the 1997 Asian financial crisis were all major contributions. But Barker argues

that Indonesian film producers had also lost touch with young audiences, who were increasingly drifting toward foreign productions and away from both the under-watched "serious" educational films and the *esek-esek* "sex films" made out of desperation to fill increasingly run-down lower class theaters (2020:13–14).

But while 1999 marked a nadir in Indonesian film history, it also announced its own forthcoming revival in the form of a nascent independent cinema. One of the few films released that year was *Kuldesak*, a microbudget omnibus film directed by Nan Triveni Achnas, Mira Lesmana, Rizal Mantovani, and Riri Riza, all of whom were making their feature film debut, and who would go on to lead the resurgence of mainstream Indonesian film in the 2000s. I'll return to this film later, but what's important to note here is the argument made by Barker and others that *Kuldesak*—along with the massively successful films that followed in its wake, like Reza's *Petualangan Sherina* (*Sherina's Adventure*, 2000), Mantovani*'s Jelangkung* (2001), and Rudi Soedjarwo's *Ada Apa Dengan Cinta?* (*What's Up With Love?*, 2002)—represented a new articulation of youth culture represented on the big screen, one which offered a formula for mass cultural adoption.

In a sense, these films also represented a search for a middle cinema. If we think of mainstream culture as a bubble filled with content and messages which, for Barker, correspond to "the field of large-scale production in which cultural goods are produced for a wide public of consumers for economic profit", then "alternative" or "indie" culture can be imagined as a constellation of satellite bubbles filled with more experimental forms which are "harder to understand, are less accessible, and thus outside of a mainstream cultural diet" (2020:19). At certain times, through the process of articulation, those outside bubbles can merge into the center, becoming absorbed into the mainstream while also expanding it in size. This is what

happened with *Kuldesak,* and what we would be required to do with *Ubudians.* But if the admission requirements for mainstream articulation are, as Barker says, that a cultural product be "familiar, relevant, and accessible to its audiences" (ibid.:20), then it's important to spell out here the challenges we faced in each of those categories.

In terms of familiarity, the biggest problem was our setting. Making a show so tied to a particular town on a particular island was always going to face this issue. Sure, New York City can be a main character of a story, because many people are familiar with the place, either through personal experience or media consumption. That said, Bali isn't exactly niche either. As far as tourist destinations in Southeast Asia go, it's a big one, with around 15 million annual visitors. That's a quarter of what New York City gets, but isn't much different from the number that visit Rome every year, another frequent setting for popular films. But more importantly, 10 million of those annual visitors to Bali are domestic tourists from Indonesia.

Perhaps more specific is Ubud itself, which is certainly on the circuit, but far less so for domestic tourists, who tend to stay down in the southern beach areas. And even if Indonesians do visit Ubud, it's normally not for participating in $500 multi-day Theta Healing workshops to "download" new codes into their DNA and rewrite past traumas. Of course this was always going to be an issue, but it was my belief that unfamiliarity could be used to our advantage. Given that this was essentially a "fish out of water" story, the confusion of our audience would match the confusion of our main characters. One needn't actually understand anything about tantric intimacy in order to be amused watching Indonesian actors like Rio Dewanto and Laura Basuki bewildered and incredulous as they attempt to explore it.

My producing partners didn't agree. Taufan pointed out that confusion isn't an enjoyable sensation for Indonesian viewers. "Fish out of water" stories were indeed popular in Indonesian

film, soothing the "inferiority complex" by showing Indonesians as members of the global community, whether studying in Cairo in Hanung Bramantyo's *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* (*Verses of Love*, 2008), connecting with estranged family in New York City in Lucky Kuswandi's *Ali & Ratu Ratu Queens* (2021), or falling in love in London in the aptly-titled Asep Kusdinar trilogy of *London Love Story* films (2016, 2017, 2018). But in most of these cases, the foreign characters and environment aren't a central focus, but are more of a background context for the Indonesian characters' personal journey, much in the same way that Bali has been for films like *Eat, Pray, Love.* As Taufan said, "we don't really need this much detail, all these workshops and rituals, it's okay to mention them but stay focused on the characters".

But characters were also a problem when it came to the second issue of relevance, which Barker distinguishes as connecting with the everyday experience of audiences. Taufan and Ipang started to feel concerned that Andi's position as a CEO of a tech company made him too unrelatable to the audience, who would have a hard time picturing or identifying with the life of someone running a billion-dollar startup. Lila as a corporate lawyer also seemed a bit unbelievable, but at least her job represented a somewhat more recognizable archetype. Taken together however, their financial stability didn't offer much room for the type of ordinary, working class stresses most Indonesians connect with, leaving only the more existential questions from the top of Maslow's pyramid, which would be less relevant to mainstream audiences.

I had previously reconciled this issue for myself by recalling the wide number of foreign films and series from about the lives of the wealthy that were popular in Indonesia. The difference is, of course, that those are wealthy people from other countries. Referencing the recent fourth season of the Netflix thriller series *You,* which saw the American main character

Joe infiltrating British high society while working as a professor at an elite college in London, Ipang explained to me that “people love that story, because they can just enjoy the fantasy” by suspending disbelief. But when that person is Indonesian, he adds, “you start to ask questions like, How did he get that job? Where is his family? It doesn’t make sense”.

This same issue had previously come up in my research on the superhero films of Bumilangit. I’d been curious about how the producers would manage to compete with the spectacle and star power of high-budget Marvel and DC films, which constitute 10 of the top 15 top-grossing films in Indonesia, far outpacing even the most successful local films. When you've grown up watching these films, which can easily cost $200 million or more to produce, it's hard to imagine getting the same thrill from something with 1/100th the budget. Which explained why previous attempts like Batman knockoffs *Garuda Superhero* (X. Jo, 2015) and *Valentine* (Agus Pestol & Ubay Fox, 2017) fared so miserably. But as Ecky Mosmarth, an inker for Bumilangit comics who now serves as their Editor-in-Chief, explained to me, the key was to not try and compete on their level at all. “Marvel superheroes are only relatable to us [Indonesians] because they're *not* Indonesian”, he told me, “that’s what makes it possible to believe”. It's not so much "this is Indonesia, we don't have superheroes here". Because of course, neither does the United States. The difference is in the incompatibility of Hollywood superhero archetypes and identities within an Indonesian doxa. Most superheroes in popular cinema are either a super soldier resulting from a government experiment (Captain America, Wolverine), a scientific genius (The Hulk, Doctor Strange), a billionaire (Batman, Iron Man), a demigod from an alien world (Superman, Thor), or a leader from an advanced hidden kingdom that might as well be an alien world (Black Panther, Aquaman). "Most Indonesians have never encountered a scientist or a billionaire in their life," Ecky told me. The trope of someone gaining fantastical powers

through advanced government technology simply can't be taken seriously in context of the dysfunctional Indonesian state. And as for aliens, they're simply not a part of local cosmology. One taxi driver I met in Jakarta spent a three-hour long trip across 5km of stand-still traffic explaining the differences between American and Indonesian horror, namely the latter's obsession with mysticism and the former's with more scientific forms of the supernatural. As he put it, "no one in Indonesia has ever seen a UFO or an alien, but everyone has a ghost story".

Therefore, the BCU would avoid these tropes altogether by giving its heroes powers stemming entirely from mystical origins. Furthermore, their characters are all ordinary people. Sancaka—who becomes Gundala, the first hero introduced in the Universe—is raised by union organizers at a factory, orphaned at a young age, grows up on the street, and eventually gets a job as a security guard, one of the most ubiquitous professions in everyday Indonesian life. Alana, who becomes the goddess incarnation Sri Asih, grows up in a life of comparable privilege thanks to her adoptive mother and benefactor, but is nonetheless an orphan and spends most of her time hanging out at a local boxing gym.

And so I could understand why we might now have to make some significant changes to our characters' journeys. Ipang and Ifan wanted Andi to be lower down the rungs at his company, so that leaving Jakarta to work on his marriage would give him financial stress. I struggled with how to make this work, given that we'd imagined Andi as this overly hubristic tech pioneer who's obsessed with the power of capitalist innovation and imagines himself as an Elon Musk or Steve Jobs figure (for the record, I have definitely met Indonesian men like this). It was that person who I'd wanted to see destroyed and ultimately reborn through his experience in Ubud. In the end we settled on simply making his company smaller, and therefore more grounded. But increasingly this question of relevance led to cutting more and more of his startup

side plot, which was meant to be a satirical critique of the gig economy, with Andi's food cart on-demand app *Lima Kaki* claiming to offer street food hawkers a more sustainable income, only to "disrupt" their entire economic model and trap them with the app's ever-decreasing wages. As important as I saw this concept to Indonesian life, given the takeover of "everything apps" like Grab and Gogek, I was told that it just seemed too confusing for most viewers, and therefore ought to be downsized.

Lastly, there was the problem of accessibility, of both form and content. Given that we couldn't do much about the setting aside from limiting the amount of what Taufan (accurately) labeled "weird foreigners and spiritual shit", and could only go so far with making Andi and Lila's jobs more relatable, our focus for rewrites ended up mostly centered on *how* we actually told the story. We all recognized that the traditional model of mainstream visual storytelling is that viewers are intrigued by a premise, hooked by an inciting incident, and then stick around to see how the conflict resolves itself. Without these things, we are left adrift, wondering why we're even watching. This was already true for cinema from its early days, although at the time it was mostly in service of creating a satisfying and entertaining experience for the audience to encourage repeat attendance. It became increasingly important for television, as viewers gained the ability to switch channels on demand if they lost interest in a particular program.

But the streaming era has magnified this issue even further. Unlike with television networks, Netflix losing eyeballs to other platforms or activities doesn't directly translate to lost revenue, but over time has a measurable impact on the number of cancelled subscriptions, or "churn rate"[29]. Today, streaming content platforms are not just competing with each other in the way that television networks have, but are also in competition with all other screen-based

[29] Netflix proudly boasts by far the lowest churn rate of streaming subscriptions, consistently around 2% for the last several years. https://www.businessinsider.com/netflix-wins-streaming-wars-this-chart-shows-why-2024-1

activities (e.g. social media, gaming), and in a certain way, with all other activities in general (e.g. life). The new law of the jungle is "viewing hours".

Through user experience (UX) research methods like A/B testing, Netflix is able to conduct large-scale experiments on its 260 million subscribers, by releasing new features, variations on its recommendation algorithm, or even alternate versions of content to select groups, and then measuring any change in viewing activity or churn rate against other control groups. This was how Netflix developed their autoplay feature, which at the end of an episode in a series automatically starts the next one, incentivizing continued viewing time (Nielsen 2021). It's also how Netflix has determined that the probability of retaining a viewer's subscription is directly correlated to the number of hours they spend on the platform. This data is of course proprietary and highly guarded, but anyone I've asked who's worked at or with Netflix seems to agree it's around 20 hours a month. That may not seem like much, considering that many people watch that much streaming content in a single week, or more. But Netflix doesn't just want its *average* viewer to watch 20 hours a month, that needs to be the floor, which means designing its entire content ecosystem around maximizing viewing time. The impact on storytelling has been immense.

It's Not TV

It may be necessary to address what, for some readers anyway, may appear to be an obvious incongruity in the framing of this text as an ethnography of filmmaking. Namely, the fact that the central project is not actually a film, but a television series. I didn't intentionally set out to challenge that distinction. It was simply my research at a film company that led me to produce a TV show. And yet I realize that even though the borders between film and television

may seem inherently arbitrary and irrelevant to myself and many younger people who have grown up in the age of limitless and unstructured streaming content, it's worth taking a moment to describe how this happened.

While it feels like a recent phenomenon, in much of the world the boundaries between mediums were already becoming blurred as far back as the late 1970s, with anthology series like *ABC Movie of the Week* producing feature-length films such as Steven Spielberg's 1971 directorial debut *Duel.* These eventually evolved into massively successful long-form miniseries like the BBC's *Forsythe Saga* (1967) and ABC's *Roots* (1977), adapted from the books of John Galsworthy and Alex Haley, respectively. But whereas these were largely viewed as television programs that were elevating the medium, it was Ingmar Bergman's *Fanny and Alexander* (1982) which first transcended categorization, winning four Academy Awards and maintaining a spot on *Sight & Sound*'s critics poll of the 100 Greatest Films of All Time for the last four decades straight. And yet, the "film" was conceived as a 312-minute television series, and in addition to its shortened theatrical cut (188 minutes), was aired in its entirety on television in four-, two-, and five-episode versions, the latter being Bergman's preferred cut. *Fanny and Alexander* is now alternately referred to as a "film" and a "TV miniseries" without much confusion, and is rightly celebrated as part of the canon of both categories[30].

And yet, for most of media history, the separation did serve a purpose, describing a clear contrast in both the mode of production and distribution and pattern of consumption of each medium. Reductively speaking, that resembled on the one hand a 90-120 self-contained story,

[30] Some of the most foundational and celebrated works of European directors like Rainer Werner Fassbinder (*Berlin Alexanderplatz*, 1980), Edgar Reitz (*Heimat*, 1984), and Krzysztof Kieślowski (*Dekalog*, 1989), are 10+ hour sagas which were first experienced by most viewers on television. Yet Fassbinder's project has been cited as a source of inspiration for multiple generations of filmmakers including Francis Ford Coppola and Michael Mann, while Reitz's was cited by Stanley Kubrick as one of his favorite films. *Dekalog*, which bases its ten stories on each of the Biblical Commandments, is listed by The Vatican as one of the best films of all time.

shot on film and projected in a cinema in front of a large public audience, and on the other, an ongoing story (or anthology of stories) aired weekly in 30-60 minute chunks, directly onto small screens in people's homes, split up by periodic commercial breaks.

Where the distinction does still make a certain degree of sense is in Indonesia. The country has not yet had its *Berlin Alexanderplatz* miniseries moment. Nor has it had its version of *The Sopranos* (1999-2007), an episodic drama that adhered to a traditional weekly one-hour format, but provided such a high degree of visual craftsmanship and depth of storytelling that it couldn't rightly be called TV—indeed, the cable network that produced the show branded their programming with the extremely apt slogan "it's not TV, it's HBO". Eventually, critics settled on a slightly awkward but ultimately widely adopted new category: Prestige TV.

The U.S. is now entering its third decade of Prestige TV, sometimes referred to as the "second golden age of television", and an entire generation has grown up recognizing television as being not only on par creatively with popular film, but more or less interchangeable with it. This is also the era of what Henry Jenkins calls "convergence culture", where the distinction between watching something in a cinema or broadcast on live television is rendered increasingly obsolete by the advent of on-demand streaming for internet devices. The term of the day is now 'content', which flows "across multiple media platforms", involves "cooperation between multiple media industries", and shapes "the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want" (Jenkins 2008:2).

Platforms like Netflix, Disney+, and Amazon Prime are repositories of tens of thousands of hours of content, designed to provide a seamless and limitless viewing experience. Television shows can be binge-watched as 8 hour films. Conversely, films can be played and paused

repeatedly in 30-minute segments. But most importantly, there is no longer any "programmer", in the traditional sense. Yes, streaming platforms curate which content they want to acquire and fill their libraries with, and design algorithms to track subscribers' viewing behavior—both individually and en masse—in order to recommend titles to display in the banner at the top their home screen. What is actually contained within that content is less important than how well it adds to the overall frictionless viewing experience. If Raymond Williams (1975) saw "flow" as the organizing techno-cultural form of television, we can see in binge-watching that form perfected.

Which brings us back to how narrative storytelling is transformed by this new form. Some scholars, like Lynn Kozak and Martin Zeller-Jacques (2021), have offered a more positive account, arguing that binge-watching can allow for a deeper and more complex mix of storylines, with less burden on the viewer to keep track of every character and plot point. Tom Hemingway (2021) looks at streaming sitcoms in particular, noting the increased reliance on running gags and subtle references which would be harder to pick up if one were watching on episode per week. But in our experience, the demand of making *Ubudians* a "bingeable" series largely worked against the kind of story we wanted to tell.

Partly inspired by shows like *Atlanta*, we wanted every episode to begin with a "cold open", a sort of vignette tangentially related to the episode's theme, but not necessarily part of the actual plot. One of my first ideas when sitting down to write the series outline was to open the first episode on static and serene shots of a lush jungle, filled with birdsong and perhaps even accompanied by a distant gamelan, only to then track the camera through the jungle floor, through a doorway in a concrete wall, and out onto a packed, traffic-jammed street in Central Jakarta, where we first meet Lila sitting in the back of a taxi. If you walk around Jakarta, you'll

see these empty plots everywhere, squeezed between tall office complexes, an uncanny reminder that you're living in swamplands. Later, Ifan added the idea of having construction workers move in to start tearing down the jungle, then pulling out to reveal banners on the concrete wall advertising the forthcoming luxury tower development, Ubudia, promising to bring "the real Bali, in the heart of Jakarta". The purpose was to be a disorienting fake out, seemingly placing you in the show's declared setting, only to pull you out of it. And there's of course the social commentary as well.

Each episode would have its own cold open. "Tribes" would start with a vertical TikTok video from an American travel influencer showing moments from her Bali trip, only to end up checking into a glamping resort where she intersects with Lila and Shanti. "The Chain" would begin with a long tracking shot through the cult house of life coaches living next door to Andi and Lila, observing their bizarre morning rituals and then following the Solartarian—who claims to not consume any food or water but persist entirely on the sun's energy—for a morning bike ride, then tailed menacingly by a black van which turns out to contain Andi, who's obsessed with catching him eating to expose him as a fraud. Based on the feedback from Netflix, these cold opens needed to be cut. All of them. As Ipang put it, "you only have a few minutes to capture [the viewer's] attention… if they don't know what's happening three minutes in, they're gone". Instead, we needed to get straight into the plot. This unfortunately meant cutting even more surreal moments from the show, as we'd tended to use the cold opens to explore that mode, especially in the psychedelic opening of the ayahuasca episode.

In addition to the beginnings being structured for easier entry, we'd also need to modify the endings, ensuring that each episode finished with a cliffhanger, some moment of suspense, that would motivate the viewer to let the next episode autoplay, to find out what happens. I

recognized this principle from the start and worked with the writers to at least make sure that there were always lingering questions that would encourage people to stick along for the ride. But that wasn't enough. It needed to *grab* them. This involved retooling every episode to feature a dramatic "tag", which in the case of a more downbeat somber ending like Andi and Lila parting ways after their big post-tantric workshop fight in "Sapiens", would now have Andi screaming out "FUUUUUUUUCK" at the top of his lungs and cutting to black, as to simply leave him lost and alone in a wide shot against the backdrop of a blood red sunset was far too subtle.

In more general terms, everything needed to be streamlined, with more motivated action, frequent plot points, and drama. Lila was now going to have an affair. Andi's work nemesis would show up in Bali and cause trouble for him. Scenes that were "too talky", especially in my self-written episode on Andi's crypto cult journey, needed to be trimmed down so as to not test the audience's patience. Piece by piece, anything overly confusing, ambiguous, or unnecessary to the core plot was gradually being diminished. I had expected this, of course. One benefit of having studied the film industry my whole life is that I knew my first attempt at this was going to be a frustrating and potentially soul-crushing experience, so I was more than prepared to accept this and watch the dream slowly fade away.

My bigger concern was over whether I was giving up too easily. But it was hard to know what to fight for, because ultimately I couldn't truly claim to know my audience. I knew there were some Indonesians who would love my version of the show, but were there enough to make it profitable? The precise financial details of the show were never fully revealed to me, largely because of my somewhat awkward dual role as showrunner and researcher, as well as Angga's instance that I focus entirely on creative development and leave the money details to those with more expertise. This was an odd arrangement. As any US-based showrunner will tell you,

managing the budget is very much a part of their job description (Bennett 2014). But one thing he'd made clear to me from the first meeting was that Visinema likely wasn't going to make a profit on *Ubudians*, and if anything might take a financial loss. The hope was that Netflix would be happy enough with the first season's reception to order a second one for a higher price, with Visinema's ownership of the IP giving them higher negotiating power. I don't think I consciously recognized it at the time, but I'd internalized this knowledge and developed a deep feeling of obligation to deliver something for Visinema that would sell. Angga was taking massive risks on fronting the show's production budget and placing me in charge, and the last thing I wanted to do was provide further evidence to him and to the industry that risks and experimentation are financially untenable. Then again, perhaps they actually are. It's this question that will be explored in the next and final chapter.

That's what's known as a cliffhanger.

Chapter 6: Art and Commerce

What followed were many more months of revisions, during which I began to take an increasingly less active role in the day-to-day script development, even as I technically remained on as showrunner. Part of this was due to the fact that I'd nearly reached the end of my year-long contract and would actually need to get back to finishing my dissertation. But I'd also begun to lose confidence in my own ability to know what was "relatable", what was "funny", and what was "good" in an Indonesian context. These are instincts that are crucial for a producer of mass entertainment, and given that my instincts seemed to be geared in the wrong direction, I felt it was best to defer increasingly to my lead writer Ifan and co-executive producer Taufan. Additionally, I had to admit to myself that I was simply losing steam with a project I'd been so excited about in theory, as the resulting picture came into focus. This became especially true as the realities of budgeting started to impact how the show could look, what kinds of stories we could tell, and whose identities we could represent. This would become especially crucial for our examination of Chinese-Indonesian identity, which makes up the bulk of this chapter.

Bye Bye, Bules

Obviously central to the show's storyline from the beginning was the inclusion of foreigners. Bali is an international tourist destination, and Ubud—as discussed in the first chapter—has been profoundly shaped by the history of the industry. Therefore much of the show's humor and strangeness arose from our Indonesian main characters encountering the odd esoteric practices of Westerners, particularly Americans, Russians, Europeans, and Australians.

Midway into the development process, Taufan came aboard and started evaluating our drafts, taking on the unenviable task of figuring out how this was all going to work within our

limited budget. One of the first things he warned me about was that there would be logistical and financial challenges in casting foreign actors, which is why you often don't see them in Indonesian films. Initially this hadn't concerned me that much, mostly because I knew we didn't really need seasoned professionals for most of the roles, and given the kind of "cultural tourists" who come to Bali, or even stay there long-term, it wasn't difficult to imagine that there were plenty of bules hanging around who also happened to dabble in acting in a previous life. And beyond that, in an age of social media influencers and content creators, isn't everyone an actor in waiting?

But as we moved into further revisions, Taufan started to bring the issue up more, and explained his concerns in more detail. We couldn't simply hire any tourist off the street. There are strict immigration and labor laws involved, limiting who can actually work as an actor (as opposed to appearing in the background in a non-speaking role), as well as permitting processes which can be extremely arduous and costly. Showing me the spreadsheet with all the current speaking roles and potential actors helped to put things in perspective. There were upwards of 50 foreigners who would need to be given proper working visas and have taxes paid to the government, and this was simply an untenable amount of expense. I didn't have to necessarily remove the overall presence of foreigners, but I would need to combine multiple roles into single individuals to reduce the total amount of actors. As I scanned down the list further, I spotted my own name, next to the character "Kyle", an American digital nomad and travel influencer I wrote into a scene at a co-working space visited by Andi in "The Chain". I asked Taufan what this was about, and he laughed and then patted me on the back, saying "sorry bro, you're gonna have to pull double duty if we want to have all these nomads". Apparently I'd be making my acting debut, along with everything else I was doing for the first time. In for a penny.

But as we cut and consolidated all the foreign characters, the total number just wasn't getting low enough. Taufan started to ask if some of the foreigners could be *blasteran*, mixed-ethnicity Indonesians. There's a very large number of Indonesians of partly foreign descent working in the film industry, and are often highly valued for their "exotic" features, especially if those features are European. Many of these actors were born or educated overseas, and upon returning to Indonesia, can very easily find work in modelling, which can then segue into a career as an actor, singer, or social media influencer with millions of followers. Even with their level of fame, Taufan assured me, they would still be less expensive to hire than foreigners, and would come with the added benefit of drawing in viewers from their established fanbases.

As our objective shifted toward making the show more relatable to mainstream audiences, this suggestion transformed from reimagining our foreign characters as tourists of mixed ethnicity, to an increased insistence that they actually be young Indonesians who had come to Ubud and assimilated into the neospiritual culture. Taufan noted that this would allow us to have less English dialogue, as they'd be able to interact with Andi and Lila in Indonesian. Instead of focusing so much on clash between foreigners and Indonesians, we'd instead highlight the generational divide between the mid-30s millennials Andi and Lila, and these young Gen-Z spiritual hipsters, all from Indonesia.

While this was certainly an interesting concept, I disagreed fully, believing firmly that the show's appeal was its novelty, and that the most novel thing we could offer was watching popular actors like Rio Dewanto and Laura Basuki interacting in English with bizarre foreigners from around the world, and navigating their strikingly different worldviews. It was supposed to be about the ethnographic encounter with the other, and the surrealism that emerges. I couldn't see this same effect happening with two Indonesians of slightly different age groups meeting

each other in Bali. I was not seconded on this view by anyone at Visinema, which again made me wonder if I simply didn't understand what people liked. Or maybe my collaborators at Visinema didn't? I'm still not sure. But whatever the case, we knew we couldn't afford the original concept. And so the total number of foreigners gradually declined further into the single digits. We had successfully decolonized Ubud, if only onscreen.

The Look

Aside from telling a unique story with unexplored themes, there were a range of smaller aesthetic and production-related ideas developed by myself and the creative team that, in aggregate, were meant to produce an overall atmosphere that would feel unfamiliar and unprecedented to viewers. There were some things I always knew would be impossible. Shooting on film—as opposed to the digital industry standard—in order to provide a distinct look and texture has almost become a cliché in Hollywood at this point[31], but would constitute a first if we had done it for *Ubudians*. In my defense, there was some justifiable reason for this. We wanted to capture a different side of Bali, far from the glossy touristic paradise depicted in almost all prior representations of the island (*Sekala Niskala* being one notable exception, and an obvious strong influence). This didn't mean denying or obfuscating the obvious beauty found in the landscapes or in the culture of the Balinese people, but rather defamiliarizing it, rendering it strange and perhaps even a bit unsettling, to reflect the subjective experience of Andi and Lila as outsiders.

[31] In the "middle cinema" of Hollywood, one will often speak of the "A24 aesthetic", referring to the independent film/television production and distribution company responsible for multiple recent Academy Award best picture winners (*Moonlight, Everything Everywhere All At Once*) and a host of critically-acclaimed TV series (*Euphoria, Ramy, Beef*). The company's work has a reputation for breaking the mold of mainstream storytelling, but also leaning into experimentation with film (or film-like) visual style, non-standard aspect ratios, creative lighting, and an overall expressionistic style filled with surreal or dreamlike imagery one might encounter in a festival film.

Many of the characteristics of film stock (e.g. color grading, grain) can now be reproduced with digital cameras in the post-production process, but there remain a few subtle differences in how light and shadows are captured which are hard to quantify, but can nonetheless impact the "feel" of a movie. But the reality is, shooting on film in Hollywood is often too costly just to achieve these subtle differences (the main costs are the film stock itself, in addition to the lab development and processing). In Indonesia, it's almost impossible. I remember coming to Taufan at one point and casually broaching the topic with him. I believe all I managed to get out of my mouth was “I’ve been wondering about the visual aesthetic”, before Taufan curtly interrupted me with “we’re not shooting on film”. It never came up again.

But when operating with the slim margins of the Indonesian film industry, even seemingly minor budget items can be points of contention. Getting ahead of myself as usual, early in development I'd been thinking about the promotional and marketing material, in particular the *Ubudians* title card which would appear prominently at the beginning of each episode. I was inspired by the way *Atlanta*'s logo, with its prominent swash serifs, invoked the Georgia peaches the state is famous for, as well as the show's playful character, and is creatively incorporated into the universe of the show’s cold opens, seen printed on a hairstyle poster on the wall of a barbershop, or on the side of a passing bus.

My friends at Silurbarong had encouraged me to feature Balinese artists on the show, and introduced me to a few illustrators whose work reflected the spiritual chaos and vibrance of the show. I brought the idea to Taufan, but was quickly shot down. "Visinema has a design team, they'll do the logo and marketing", he told me. I attempted to push back, feeling it was my duty as the showrunner to advocate for “the vision”. Highlighting Balinese culture and achieving a unique look were essential to making *Ubudians* stand out as something new and different. Even

if people weren't totally sure what the show was about or sold on the premise, the "coolness" factor could drive people to check it out. Wasn't that worth a small expense? We could even take it out my salary, I told him. But I could usually tell how untenable a particular proposal was simply by Taufan's level of curtness or visible annoyance. While a logo probably wouldn't cost very much to produce, it was simply unthinkable that we'd outsource this when Visinema was already paying people a full-time salary to do this. "Of course it's nice to have Balinese artists in *Ubudians*," Taufan later explained, "but first we need to pay for the show".

Cover Versions

An even more essential component to the aesthetic "vibe" of the show wasn't visual at all, but involved our soundtrack. I didn't want *Ubudians* to sound like anything else in Indonesian media, which meant thinking outside the box when it came to our music choices. This meant forgoing the Indonesian pop-folk songs or emotionally manipulative orchestration that tend to dominate nearly every scene of mainstream productions. At the same time, *Ubudians* would need to have a much more playful and maximalist approach than something like *Sekala Niskala,* with its sparse and subtle pan flute tones.

The middle space I'd landed on came to me out of our *Ubudians* Spotify playlist, which I'd collaborated on with the writers to populate with songs we felt inspired by while writing the episodes, or which captured a certain atmosphere or essence which mirrored that of our show. It was a truly eclectic mix, featuring a lot of indie or alternative Indonesian music from a range of genres, including Eastern Indonesian hip hop like the Timur-originated group MukaRakat, underground (and illegal) punk rock from Aceh, and the Bali-based electronic music collective Gabber Modus Operandi. But many tracks were international, as wide-ranging as the 70s

American soul of Minnie Riperton, the 80s British electronic pop of Depeche Mode, and the undefinable Japanese neo-psychedelia of Fishmans. As we continued writing, I couldn't help but begin to mentally attach some of these songs to the visuals I was seeing in my head, and I started to wonder how I could actually get them into the show.

I'd previously spoken to Angga on the set of *Mencuri Raden Saleh* about the difficulty—bordering on impossibility—of licensing popular international music for Indonesian films. Angga once tried to get a John Mayer song for one of his films, and went as far as reaching out to Columbia Records to get a quote for licensing, only to learn that the fee (approximately $150,000 USD) exceeded the entire budget of the film. I knew using these songs in their original form would be impossible. But that's not actually what I wanted to do anyway. Our aesthetic goal was to produce a sensation of the uncanny, familiar but strange, in-betweenness and ambivalence. It occurred to me that we could address both challenges by taking well-known international songs and recording cover versions by Indonesian artists.

Iconic hippie anthems like the Zombies' Summer of Love inspired "Time of the Season", or more recent counterculture statements like Erykah Badu's hip hop-as-religion manifesto "The Healer", could be performed in the Indonesian language and incorporate local musical instruments and styles, evoking the surreal experience of globalization and collision of cultures and spiritualities at the heart of Balinese contemporary life. What's more, covering a song in visual media means paying a fee only to the publisher owning the rights, as opposed to featuring the original song, which would require paying an additional fee to the owner of the master recording (usually a major record label). This can mean considerably lower costs, especially overseas, where publishers might be willing to offer songs at a discount.

But "lower costs" are still costs, and they add up. So while my production partners at Visinema were willing to entertain the idea early in development, once we got to the budget planning phase, it didn't make sense practically. Even if we only featured one such cover per episode—assuming an average of $10,000 USD to license each song and another $5,000 to the local artists performing them—we'd end up exceeding the entire cost of a single episode (around $150,000). The idea was scrapped, and the team agreed we'd reapproach the issue in post-production, letting the music editor call the shots. Once again, novelty came at too high a price. Our Indonesian cover of Drake's "Passionfruit" would have to remain an unfulfilled dream (okay, in retrospect maybe that wasn't such a loss).

Chindo

Bit by bit, the vision of the show that had seemed so clear and achievable to me at the start was revealed as financially impossible, and chipped away. But nothing had quit as much impact as one particular budget issue, which would lead to an erasure of a major theme at the center of our show.

As previously explained, the ethnic identities of our main characters gradually became a core element after Gabby and Rain came aboard as writers. This was especially true for Lila, whose Chinese-Indonesian (or Chindo)[32] background had now come to inform much of her story arc. Building a deep characterization for Lila had been a challenge for me during my initial development of the series bible. You could chalk this up in part to men being generally inept when it comes to writing complex women, although that would also be a bit of a cop-out. After

[32] The slang term 'Chindo' has emerged somewhat recently in Indonesia, but seems to be preferred by most younger Indonesians I speak with, especially those of Chinese heritage, who use it interchangeably with 'Chinese-Indonesian'. I've mostly used it here to refer to those living in present day Indonesia.

all, I was also extremely invested in the character of her childhood friend Shanti, not only as a source of conflict for Lila, but as a woman on her own spiritual journey in Ubud, who I'd hoped the audience would initially view with irritation only to later admire her, and in doing so cause them to challenge their preconceptions.

Andi had ended up with a more entertaining story arc by spending most of the series criticizing and loathing the Ubudians, only to end up being saved by them and, most ironically of all, perhaps even becoming one himself. This provided him both with more comedic moments and an emotionally satisfying transformation. Lila felt a bit like the "straight man", the character in a comedy or farce who remains stoic and composed so the outrageous characters appear even more so by contrast. For this reason, most people I shared the initial story with seemed to enjoy and relate to the character of Andi, while finding Lila to be somewhat boring or opaque. But I took solace in knowing that I'd eventually be joined by Indonesian cowriters who could develop the character far beyond what I could imagine.

Once we'd established that Lila was Chindo and Andi was Minang, and that their elopement had caused major rifts between them and their families, it felt like we'd cracked the "core wound" that the two would need to repair in their journey together, and having done so many other character elements started falling into place, particularly for Lila. Originally her story was about a woman who had grown up with an activist spirit, troubled by the inequities of the society around her, and had dreamt of some day working in human rights and humanitarian law but had gradually suppressed that part of herself in order to conform to the expectations of family and society. She'd entered the corporate world in spite of her misgivings, and now spent much of her energy fighting to be recognized and appreciated in a male-dominated field.

This aspect had largely been inspired by the women's activist groups I'd encountered when I first started visiting Indonesia. My friend Dhyta Caturani, who has founded and mentored multiple organizations throughout Indonesia related to women's rights, gender-based violence, and digital security for LGBTQ people, encouraged me to visit the *Kamisan* (Thursdays) protest in Central Jakarta. Every Thursday since 2007, families of victims from the 1965-66 mass killings, the disappearances and murders of activists during the end of the New Order in 1998, along with more human rights abuses, gather in front of the Presidential Palace dressed in black (often accompanied by black umbrellas) to silently protest, a reflection of the government's own continued silence[33]. Some of the founding members and most committed members of the Kamisan protests are women, including mothers of student protestors killed by police in the 1998 anti-government protests. I've also been inspired by the growing body of literature recentering the role of women in the formation of the Indonesian state (Blackburn 2004), in opposition to the New Order (Suryomenggolo 2012), and in constructing contemporary Muslim society (Rinaldo 2013).

But for Lila to be Chindo as well added a new dimension, the social inequities that had troubled her from a young age now made more personal to her, and more historically specific for the viewer. She'd have lived through the outward hostility and violent attacks on ethnic Chinese during the fall of the New Order, and experienced the discrimination and marginalization—in both overt and covert forms—that remain present to this day. Lila's desire to be accepted by her husband's Minang Muslim family would mirror her desire to be accepted by Indonesian society more broadly, and also belie deeper feelings of resentment toward both. Establishing Lila's Chindo identity then caused us to do the same with Shanti. This wasn't fully necessary, as it

[33] Recently President Joko Widodo did officially acknowledge the history of human rights abuses, but stopped short of initiating any formal process for truth and reconciliation or legal accountability (Hsu 2023).

wouldn't be impossible for the two girls from different ethnic backgrounds to grow up together. But from Gabby's perspective, it would have been likely for Lila to have either attended a mostly Chindo school, or formed a close bond with another Chindo student at a school where both found themselves in the minority. This also allowed us to develop a new layer to Lila and Shanti's conflict.

The fourth episode "Tribes", written by Gabby, had been built around Lila's friendship with Shanti (née Jessica), who had grown up in the same community but whose relationship with Indonesian society was radically different due to her higher economic status as the daughter of a petrochemical executive. After college, Lila had started her life with Andi and, while her best friend studied abroad in the United States, dropped out, changed her name to Shanti, and spent the subsequent decade floating around on her father's dime before ending up in Bali as a yoga instructor. In "Tribes", the two would reconnect at a "high priestess awakening ceremony" with a group of women from Europe and the U.S., their underlying tensions and childhood resentments gradually building and exploding to the surface as a massive thunderstorm wreaks havoc around them.

During the Semarang writer's bootcamp we'd had a number of conversations about different aspects of Chindo life and history we could feature in the show's narrative. And in the months that followed, Gabby and I talked increasingly about intersectional analysis, which has now made its way into mainstream U.S. politics but is almost entirely absent from Indonesia's nascent discourse on identity[34], outside of a few chronically online Twitter communities. Gabby's lived experience as both Chindo and Indian, but a member of a mostly Chindo peer

[34] While the official government dictionary (KBBI) does not yet have an entry for it, the logical loanword (*intersektionalitas*) is beginning to see some use, notably in the Kartini Conference, the first annual academic meeting on Indonesian feminism conducted entirely in the national language, which started in 2023.

group, offered her an innate understanding of how minority status can impact people in the same group differently based on their relative access to forms of financial or social capital, and she felt excited about sharing this perspective in her writing. But most of all, she and all of us were thrilled that through Lila we'd have a chance to explore critical and often forgotten aspects of Indonesian history and contemporary Chindo life.

I'd titled the episode "Tribes" from the outset because I had seen the term used so frequently in Ubud, often in neospiritual or digital nomad circles. Social media wellness influencers and life coaches would speak about the importance of "finding your tribe" in an increasingly dislocated and disconnected world, and explain how they'd achieved this by traveling to a small island in Southeast Asia to connect with other like-minded spiritual types in co-living spaces like TRIBAL (as mentioned in Chapter 2). If I briefly set aside my irritation over new age appropriation of Orientalist tropes, I can fully appreciate and resonate with the tendency among many secular Westerners disillusioned with the lack of meaning and community offered by late stage capitalism to indulge in primitivist fantasies of building a tribe with a common purpose. But for Lila, the repeated evocation of the term, as well as the casual racism she'd witness on the part of her fellow "goddesses", would gradually begin to sour her newfound optimism for Ubudian spirituality.

Shanti and Lila would ultimately be caught between two "tribes", the foreign digital nomads of their women's circle on one side, and on the other a group of older Balinese women from the nearby village—the same nationality as Lila and Shanti, and yet just as much their "tribe" as the European priestesses-in-training. But just as Lila grew increasingly irritated with the priestess circle, her interactions with the Balinese women would show that "going native" was also not a possibility. Despite sharing a nationality, she's unable to fully connect with the

local practices and mentality, and feels unseen and alone in her own identity. In the end, Lila and Shanti rediscover this connection in each other, not only in their sisterly bond nor in a homogenized and bounded cultural identity as Chindo women, but in a shared set of kinship relations, social practices, and cultural history formed in a specific area and shaped by a particular moment in history, namely West Jakarta in the 1990s. But as much as they'd shared in life, their class difference still needed to be the major hurdle to overcome. To understand why, we first need some context for how Chinese-Indonesians came to occupy their position in Indonesian society.

'The Chinese Problem'

The complete history of ethnic Chinese in Maritime Southeast Asia is immensely complex and dates back at least two millennia, with their trade networks having profoundly shaped the region's economic, cultural, and religious connection to mainland Asia. Chinese traders played an essential role not only in the spread of Buddhism throughout the archipelago, but also Islam, and were also instrumental in popularizing the use of the lingua franca Melayu, which became the language of nationalist ideas and eventually of the Indonesian nation-state (Oetomo 1991). But their relationship with Indonesian nationalism in particular warrants significant space here, given its centrality to the show's narrative as just described, but also to the history and current political economy of the Indonesian film industry, as examined later.

As with so many nationalist ideologies, the story starts with colonialism. Under the Dutch East India Company (VOC) a distinction had always been made in the rights and status afforded to different ethnic groups. But after the VOC was nationalized in 1799 and the Dutch state took direct control of governing the archipelago, these distinctions were gradually codified and

solidified, eventually becoming a three-tier vertical caste system, with Christians (almost entirely Europeans) at the top, non-Christian "Foreign Orientals" (Chinese, Arab, and Indian) in the middle, and the archipelago's hundreds of remaining ethnic groups lumped together at the bottom as "natives" (Dutch: *inlander*).

Chinese merchants had been visiting and settling in Indonesia since the first millennium, and their knowledge of trade networks and local customs made them valuable to the Dutch as intermediaries between themselves and the natives whose spices they intended to extract. Skilled Chinese artisans were also critical for the construction of Batavia (now Jakarta), and many remained in the city and its surrounding countryside afterwards, working as sugar manufacturers, shopkeepers, and merchants, further benefitting from the economic boom that followed in mid-17th century (Reybrouck 2024:47). However, not all Chinese in the East Indies achieved such positions of higher economic status, and individual experiences were as varied as the archipelago itself. While some came to the archipelago to build a fortune before returning to China or Singapore, many remained to "eke out meager livings as itinerant paddlers, fishermen, and craftsmen" (Fernando and Bulbeck 2009:197) throughout the archipelago, and often cultivated "local roots, adopted Islam, took Javanese or Malay names, intermarried and even served in high office" in kingdoms like Mataram (Ricklefs 2008:110). Distinctions were gradually formed—however arbitrarily—between those of Chinese descent (*peranakan*) and first-generation immigrants (*totok*), which are still widely in use today.

Furthermore, privileges also came with severe downsides. The more wealth that Chinese amassed, the more they gained the ire of both the European elites who refused to see them as equals, and the native proletariat who did see them as equals and thus felt resentment toward their status and power to exploit their labor. Times of extreme hardship, such as the malaria

outbreaks and collapse in sugar prices during the 1730s, brought these latent tensions to the surface, as they did in 1740, when 10,000 Chinese residents of Batavia (most of those living in the city at the time) were massacred by VOC-aligned groups in pogroms known as the *Geger Pacinan,* or "Chinatown tumult". As would be the case in future attacks on ethnic Chinese, little distinction was made between landowners, laborers, or farmers, or indeed between men, women, or children. As the Dutch diversified their interests beyond the nutmeg and cloves of Maluku and expanded into the cash crop juggernaut of the 19th century, the value of the Chinese mercantile class to their operations was diminished, and they began to impose increasing restrictions on Chinese freedom of movement and land ownership. Future waves of Chinese immigrants—particularly unskilled Hakka from Guangdong—would come seeking work as coolies in gold mines on Kalimantan or tobacco plantations on Sumatra, often finding themselves trapped in indentured service resembling slavery, both in financial arrangement and working conditions, with as many as a third dying before finishing their contracts (Reybrouck 2024:69–70).

The 19th century cultivation system (Dutch: *cultuurstelsel*) demanded that farmers reserve 20% (often much higher in practice) of their land to growing crops like tobacco, coffee, and tea, contributing massive profits to the Netherlands, but offering no nutrition to the native population. The outcome, a significant food deficit, was all too predictable (though perhaps not at the time). Famine and epidemics were widespread, and the brutality of the colonial government's policies in the East Indies—as documented in the 1860 novel *Max Havelaar*—so shocked the Dutch public that they began to demand better treatment of the indigenous population[35]. When liberalization increased in the East Indies toward the turn of the 20th century, first through the influence of free market economic philosophy on Dutch politics, and then through the ethical

[35] Foundational writer Ananda Pramoedya Toer has referred to *Mas Havelaar* as "the book that killed colonialism", not just in Indonesia, but indirectly throughout the world (Lane 2023).

policy, livelihoods did not improve for most of the native population, but they did for many Chinese entrepreneurs (Ricklefs 2008:151). As taxation shifted from in kind crop payments to currency, so grew the centrality of moneylenders and tax farmers, "most of whom were Chinese" (Ricklefs 2008:140).

The independence era saw as much ideological variation within ethnic Chinese as existed throughout the archipelago in general. Beyond *peranakan* and *totok,* divisions formed along class and political lines, and in the decades leading up to the Japanese invasion of World War II, a host of organizations proliferated to advocate for competing visions of the colony's future. Most of the "Cabang Atas", the Chinese gentry and aristocracy, were affiliated with Chung Hwa Hui (Chinese Association), which supported continued Dutch rule, hoping in return to gain Dutch citizenship and equal political power in governing the population. Others, like the journalists affiliated with the *Sin Po* newspaper, were Chinese Nationalists, and believed that closer affiliation to the Republic of China was the best path forward, but were themselves split on whether to stay in the colony or push for a mass exodus and return to China. And then there were the members of Partai Tionghoa Indonesia (Chinese Indonesian Party), sympathetic both to the cause of Indonesian self-determination and to the left-wing ideals of social egalitarianism, and sought to be absorbed as equal citizens of a future Indonesian nation-state (Suryadinata 2005).

Independence was gained after a bloody colonial war, and at last in 1949 the Dutch ceded control of the archipelago[36]. At the same time, Mao Zedong's Chinese Communist Party defeated the Kuomintang and established the People's Republic of China, setting the stage for

[36] Ironically, actions taken by the Dutch and the Japanese, both of whom intended to retain possession of the archipelago, unintentionally expedited this radical transformation. The Dutch ethical policy was a misnomer, but it did result in thousands of native Indonesians obtaining secondary and tertiary education, which Benedict Anderson points out was critical for building a national consciousness. The Japanese sought to create a native political structure and volunteer army for governing a puppet independent state under the Empire, and in doing so provided further legitimacy to Sukarno and Hatta's nascent republic, as well as the means to combat returning Dutch forces after Japan's surrender (Reybrouck 2024).

the next half century of Chinese Indonesian politics. In the early years of Indonesian independence, the long-extant suspicions against ethnic Chinese as Dutch colonial sympathizers and capitalist explicators were gradually transformed into accusations of loyalty to China and global communism. Even after the Bandung Conference resulted in a Sino-Indonesian dual nationality agreement which saw hundreds of thousands of Chinese Indonesians revoke their Chinese citizenship in favor of Indonesian nationality, these suspicions did not abate (Willmott 2009). During Sukarno's Guided Democracy period, Chinese (as well as Arab and Dutch) entrepreneurs were targeted with restrictions in order to favor native businesses. Pramoedya Ananta Toer, who had been imprisoned by the Dutch for two years while fighting for Sukarno's nationalist revolution, criticized these policies in a series of front page articles in the daily *Bintang Timur,* and was subsequently imprisoned by Sukarno's government for nine months in 1960[37].

But it was Suharto's New Order that would have the most consequential and lasting impact on the current experience of Chinese-Indonesians today. During this period, as, Chang-Yau Hoon writes, "the ethnic Chinese were given the privilege to expand the nation's economy (and their own wealth), but, paradoxically, were marginalized and discriminated against in all social spheres: culture, language, politics, entrance to state-owned universities, public service and public employment" (2011:1). This marginalization stemmed from the military regime's *pembauran* (assimilation) policy, which sought to absorb and therefore erase "Chineseness" from the Indonesian body politic, under the pretense of creating national harmony, but in practice perpetuating "widespread negative perceptions of a stigmatized community that could be utilized

[37] Toer had the tragic and infuriating distinction of being locked away by three separate regimes over the course of the 20th century. After the failed coup of 1965, he was accused by the incoming Suharto government of communist affiliation, and spent the subsequent 14 years in prison on Buru Island, where he orated his formative quartet of novels.

in multiple ways to manage or redirect popular unhappiness and/or keep an important economic force under control" (Sai and Hoon 2013:7).

Assimilation was to be the answer to what was eventually called "the Chinese problem", or *masalah Cina*, and meant total or near-total bans on the Chinese language, expressions of Chinese culture like Lunar New Year (*Imlek*) celebrations, almost no access to jobs outside of trade and commerce, and a mass "Indonesianization" of Chinese family names[38]. While most of these laws were repealed during the Reformasi period, their effects still linger today. Even as Imlek is celebrated openly in Jakarta every year, and now celebrated as a sign of Indonesia's progress and commitment to its "unity in diversity" motto, the vast majority of the Chinese-Indonesians who participate in its festivities still possess Indonesianized names.

As Ariel Heryanto writes, this assimilation as a project of cultural unify was "designed to fail", as to truly integrate ethnic Chinese as equal members of the Indonesian national self "would mean giving up the division of labor by race upon which the status quo depended" (Heryanto 2014:141). The New Order continued favoring and economically supporting Chinese-Indonesian elites behind the scenes, in doing so preventing the so-called *pribumi* (native) Indonesian population from transforming itself "into an independent social force of its own (for instance, a domestic bourgeoisie) with the potential of becoming a political opposition" to the regime (ibid.). This favoritism in turn continued and strengthened the pre-Independence resentments, creating social pressure and isolation that ensured this Chindo elite would never constitute a true threat.

The experience of Chindos as a specialized minority or "essential outsider", at once privileged and marginalized, has at times been compared to that of Jews in Europe (Chirot and

[38] Just one example, Eka Widjaja, who at the time of his death was the third richest man in Indonesia, combined his surname *Oei (黃)* with *-djaja* to form a variation of a common Sanskrit-derived Indonesian surname.

Reid 1997), and I've often been struck by the same observation, particularly when it comes to the disconnect between popular perceptions and reality. In a textbook example of the formal fallacy of affirming the consequent, it can be easy for people to believe that if every money lender they meet is of a certain group (Chindo or Jewish), then it stands to reason that all members of that group are money lenders, or of the moneyed class. This is a key thought pattern for reproducing stereotypes. But of course, very few Chindos are actually wealthy elites, just as very few Jews are. But those of lesser means are by their very nature less visible in popular culture, and thus harder to imagine.

According to the official census, Chindos make up only 1.2 percent of the nation's population[39], but in Jakarta this number rises to 5 or 6 percent. Given this level of concentration in close proximity to the film industry, along with the community's relative economic prosperity, one would expect a high degree of participation in filmmaking. And while this may be true behind the camera (in my own research I've encountered many Chindos working on set at every level of every department), the same cannot be said for on-screen representation.

Krishna Sen observed and documented this same phenomenon both during and before the New Order, noting that "the role of the ethnic Chinese in the foundation of Indonesian cinema, not just as producers, financiers and distributors, but also as the creative fount of cinema as directors and cameramen, is undeniable", but that they are also "rarely present as the subject matter of film texts even before their absence is effectively mandated by government policy" (1994:171). The earliest films screened in Indonesia were from Shanghai, and the first big hit film produced locally in the Malay language, *Black and White Snakes (Ouw Peh Tjoa)*, was

[39] This is most likely a significant undercount, in no small part due of their long history of stigmatization and violence, as well as forced assimilation under the New Order. The figure I hear most often is closer to 3 percent, but it's impossible to quantifiably assess this.

made by native-born Chinese filmmaker The Teng Chun. In the post-Independence era, as nationalism become concerned with cultivating a "narrowly-defined nativist conception of a 'pure' or 'authentic' Indonesia" (Heryanto 2014:134), and cinema became a tool for that vision, ethnic Chinese receded into the background, many changing their names long before the government compelled them to do so. By the time the New Order had come to power, as Krishna Sen writes, "the 'Chinese' owned the overwhelming majority of production companies, movie theatres, the import and distribution networks, but could not speak openly as 'Chinese Indonesians' in the texts of the films they funded" (2006:177).

Time Travel

The other major aspect of *Ubudians* that hinged on Lila's Chindo heritage was the ayahuasca trip in episode eight. "The Grandmother Plant", also written by Gabby, would see Andi and Lila joining a medicinal plant ceremony in the misty wooded highlands of central Bali[40]. There they would each drink from the sacred Amazonian vine and set off on separate journeys into the spirit realm. Each would set an intention first, but it's often said that the medicine gives you want you need, not necessarily what you want. While Lila's journey would be a revelatory and transcendent catharsis, Andi's would be a dark descent into abject horror and existential despair. Despite the heavy subject matter, I'd somehow imagined that the episode would still be comedic, through the sudden shift in genre and sheer absurdity of contrast between the two characters' experiences.

[40] While I always believed the show needed a psychedelic episode, I wasn't aware of ayahuasca ceremonies actually taking place in Bali until we after were already deep into development. I'm told that the vine and leaves (in powder form) are smuggled in with ease, although there have been arrests in recent years of Australian and Russian tourists in possession of the powder, also known popularly by its chemical name DMT (Dimethyltryptamine).

After drinking the tea (and summarily vomiting into a bucket), Lila passes out and finds herself transported to a place called the Akashic Records. Derived from 19th century Russian mystic Helena Blavatsky's Theosophical spiritual tradition, the concept has since been absorbed (along with many of Blavatsky's esoteric ideas) into the web of contemporary neospiritualism, which many Ubudians describing it to me as a separate plane of existence in which the entire history of the universe is contained. Some believe in techniques, meditative or psychedelic, which can allow one to access this compendium and explore their past lives, which is what happens to Lila as she experiences herself transported through time and placed into the consciousness of three ancestors (literal and figurative), seeing life through their eyes (but still appearing to us as Lila, in different costumes).

The story function of these visions for Lila would be to challenge and expand her idea of what being a wife, being a mother, and being an Indonesian could look like, contributing to her eventual decision at the end of the season to part ways with Andi and pursue her goals as a human rights activist. Prior to the Semarang bootcamp, I hadn't finalized which specific figures Lila would occupy, only that through various eras in Indonesian history. My initial suggestions were a 15th century Javanese princess in the Majapahit empire due to be married off to a nobleman, a 19th century nationalist and women's rights activist in Dutch East Indies modeled after Raden Adjeng Kartini, and finally Lila's own grandmother, raising Lila's mom during the tumultuous and traumatic 1960s.

But once we'd applied the Chindo lens to Lila's ayahuasca journey, new opportunities appeared for us explore not just Indonesian historical figures, but Chinese-Indonesian ones. Through our follow-up discussions and research, the Kartini character later became Raden Ayu Tan Peng Nio, (somewhat) popularly referred to as the "Mulan of Java", referencing the Chinese

folk story (and popular Disney franchise) about a young girl who pretends to be a man in order to serve in the military and defend her people against a nomadic horde. Tan Peng Nio, so the legend says, also disguised herself and took up arms against her oppressors, in this case the VOC during the Chinese War of 1741 to 1743, sparked by the massacre in Batavia. One of the most significant conflicts of the waning VOC era, the war was noteworthy for being led predominately by ethnic Chinese, who partnered with Javanese leaders and military commanders in a failed attempt to drive out the Dutch and form a new nation (Raffles 1830:231–244). Tan Peng Nio's story would place Lila at the center of early anticolonial resistance, complicating the role of ethnicity and gender in that history, both for her and for the viewers watching.

During the Semarang bootcamp, Visinema Skriptura assistant writer Febri, who is Balinese, suggested that we replace the yet-unnamed Majapahit princess with another legendary figure, in this case Kang Cing Wie, one half of the Barong Landung, a pair of large human puppets seen at temples throughout the island and frequently brought out for festivals and ceremonies such as those occurring during the holy weeks of Galungan and Kuningan.

According to Febri, Cing Wie was the daughter of a powerful Chinese merchant in the 12th century CE who married King Sri Jayapangus of Balingkang, forging long-lasting cultural and economic ties between the island and China, and generating a harmonious fusion between Buddhism and Hinduism that remains true to this day. Cing Wie is sometimes referred to as a goddess of prosperity, and it's common for worshippers to offer her *kepeng* (known in Bali as *pis bolong*), Chinese cash coins it's often said she was responsible for introducing to the archipelago. The coins were used by merchants for centuries, even after the Dutch brought their own currency to the region, and remained legal tender in Bali well into the mid-20th century, and are now have an array of ceremonial applications (Raka, A.A.G. et al. 2020).

As is common with legends, there are several versions of the story which have evolved over time, some more apocryphal than others, and there is little archaeological material through which to trace back a primary source (Wijaya 2022). The version we used in the script was mostly based on Febri's recollection, along with some additional details I picked up while doing research in Pinggan, the contemporary village on the edge of the enormous Gunung Batur caldera in northern Bali, where it's said the kingdom of Balingkang once stood[41]. In both stories, Cing Wie was unable to have children, leading Jayapangus to meditate at Batur for guidance. It was there that he met Dewi Danau, the goddess of Lake Batur, and the two had an affair and conceived a son together. After years of searching, Cing Wie finally found her husband at the lake, but when the goddess learned that Jayapangus already had a wife, she became furious and cursed the couple, turning them into the stone effigies seen today. While this may seem like an oddly tragic tale for celebrating unity, the outpouring of grief by the people after losing their king and queen helped Dewi Danau realize how beloved they were, and she promised she would allow them to return periodically to bless and purify the island.

But the allegory became even more powerful with one final piece relayed to me by Kadek Krishna Adidharma, a Balinese author, translator, and tour company owner from Pinggan. Kadek told me that Jayapangus had actually met Cing Wie in the northern port of Singaraja, and when priests refused to give their blessing due to Cing Wie's ethnicity and religion, the two were forced to elope and flee to Batur, where they formed their new kingdom. Furthermore, while Cing Wie never had children herself, she essentially ruled over Balingkang in Jayapangus's stead when he absconded with Dewi Danau. This, in Kadek's words, made here "a mother to the

[41] When I visited the Pura Dalem Balingkang temple complex, an attendant told me that the name of the village itself is derived from the fusion of 'Bali' and 'Kang', representing Kang Cing Wie's marriage to Jayapangus.

whole kingdom, even the bastard son of Dewi Danau", who she'd encountered in the forest and loved as her own[42]. This had now become a perfect journey to cause Lila to reflect not only on her questions about her duty to be a mother to one child against many, but also on her elopement with Andi, and how the fractures it caused in both their families brought her more shame and grief about her Chindo identity and a need to prove herself to others.

The final figure in the journey, at first Lila's grandmother (cleverly mirroring the name *abuela* sometimes used by Peruvian shamans to describe ayahuasca), instead became Lila's mother, who had passed away sometime in Lila's adolescence. Lila remembered her mother as cold, unaffectionate, and easily irritated by her children, something I'd put into the story outline based on stories told to me by several of my Indonesian friends. Each of them diagnosed this behavior later in their lives as resulting from their mothers marrying and having children too young, never having been given a chance to pursue other dreams of education or entrepreneurship. They reminded me of stories my mom had told me about her mother, one of the first female officers in the United States Navy during World War II, with a keen mind for science, who stopped working to raise six children, loving each of them but never fully able to let go of her vision of another life.

While the prospect of Lila mothering her own mother felt like poetry to me, we wanted this segment to feel deeply personal and cathartic for both Lila and the audience, and being so far removed from her own life experience might not resonate enough. Lila instead becoming her mother and seeing *herself* through her mother's eyes could provide its own catharsis, helping us understand what Lila went through as a child, and helping Lila understand what her mom went

[42] That son, Prince Mayadenawa, is himself a central figure in Balinese mythology, later becoming a malevolent king who abused his people and rebelled against the gods, and whose eventually defeat at the hands of Dewa Indra (the king of the gods) is observed in Galungan, the holiest day in the Balinese calendar.

through while raising her. Lila would emerge in the form of an unknown young Chinese-Indonesian woman growing up in Jakarta in the 1980s and 1990s. We see her discover a love of science, and beg her father to send her to university, which he can't afford to do. Instead she marries a noodle shop owner named Asiong, and together they have two girls. Years later, the girls are running around the house, causing a ruckus, and the woman harshly admonishes the older girl, calling her "Liliana". It finally dawns on Lila, and the audience, that the life she's witnessing is that of her own mother.

The climax of Lila's journey takes place in May 1998, during the anti-government riots that coincided with an explosion of violence around the country, much of it directed at Chinese-Indonesians or businesses purportedly owned by them. Stories from this period tell of shops spray-painted with '*milik pribumi*' (native-owned) in order to designate which ones the mobs could leave standing. Ariel Heryanto describes the unique impunity with which these attacks were carried out:

> No racial or ethnic groups in Indonesia, no matter how agitated, could possibly inflict a systematic violence in which 1,198 lives (of which 27 died from gunfire) were lost, 150 females were raped, 40 shopping malls and 4,000 shops were burned down and thousands of vehicles and of houses were set afire simultaneously in 27 areas in a capital city of 10 million inhabitants in less than 50 hours. All was done without the culprit having to confront the state security forces or face indictment! (2014:136)

We took great care when considering addressing these events, as we didn't want to sensationalize this horrific period, nor risk retraumatizing Chindos who lived through it. I myself have Chindo friends in their early 30s who, having been children in 1998, have nightmares about violent events that they cannot directly remember. One of my closest friends, a Chindo woman living in Bali, prefers to live in the city rather than among the iconic rice fields, as she constantly has fears of mobs approaching through the treeline and smashing her windows.

But it was also an important part of the story, and so we included a scene at the end of Lila's journey in which the mobs are raging outside on the street, and with Asiong defending the front of their noodle shop, Lila (as her mother) takes little Lila and her sister into the storage room at the back of their noodle shop, boarding up the entrance, and sitting on the floor with the two of them, soothing them with a song she'd heard from Lila's grandmother at a young age. Lila embodying her own mother allows her to witness the struggle she endured, the lengths she went to in order to keep her children safe, and a moment of true tenderness she had fully forgotten as she mentally repressed the memory of those events.

To Visinema's credit, they were always completely supportive of this aspect of the story, which I didn't take for granted. The legacy of SARA policies during the New Order, even after being lifted, had left a chilling effect on discourses over any identitarian conflict, frequently resulting in self-censorship in media, the arts, education, and politics. While this has changed somewhat in recent years, popular media that opts to reference Indonesia's "troubled past" often does so in ways that renders the groups involved in those conflicts, both perpetrators and victims, as vague and nondescript, so that no one today can see themselves reflected in either and risk developing feelings of shame or a desire for accountability. The late 1990s in particular are often shown in flashbacks as a period of "turmoil". We may see students demonstrating against the government, and we may even see rural villagers or urban workers demonstrating against corrupt developers or factory owners. But the Reformasi period has subsequently become so mythologized as a total victory over authoritarianism and corruption, that the images don't seem to index any current concern. So it was important for us to be explicit about Lila's family being targeted as Chinese-Indonsians.

Casting Failure

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, we already believed we had the perfect actress for Lila in Laura Basuki, who was in contact with Visinema and enthusiastic about the project, and excited to work with director Anggi Noen again. But that was in mid-2022, and things change fast in the film industry. A year later, Laura's string of acclaimed performances had put her in even higher demand than before, with the actress appearing in no less than four major films over the course of 2023. As a result, I was told by Taufan, her asking price had risen considerably and now appeared too high for our show's budget. This was disappointing enough, given that Laura is one of the most talented actresses working in Indonesia, and in personality and physical appearance was exactly how myself and the writing team had imagined Lila. What made it devastating, however, was a lack of any clear alternative.

Visinema gave me the option of finding another actress to fill the role, but I was at a bit of a loss. Despite having watched many Indonesian films, I had no actual way of identifying who was, in fact, Chindo or not. Nor did I even feel comfortable doing so, given my own personal and academic opposition to the credibility of racial profiling. I'd resorted to doing web searches for "listicles" on Indonesian gossip websites (e.g. "13 Seleb Indonesia Berwajah Oriental Yang Paling Cantik" or "13 Indonesian Celebrities with the Most Beautiful Oriental Faces"). But the lists all had the same people, who were mostly other kinds of celebrities like singers or children of businessmen, or too young to play Lila, a woman in her mid-30s.

The included names also seemed to be mostly guesses, and specious at best. One notable example that came up a number of times was no other than Rio Dewanto, our actor for Andi. I was surprised and a bit confounded, as I was unaware that Rio was Chindo. I was also struck by the irony of this, and even wondered briefly if I could simply swap Andi and Lila's ethnic

backstories. I brought it up to Angga, Rio's longtime friend, who burst out laughing. "What?! Where did you see that? Rio's not Chinese!". He went on to clarify that "people just say that because he's got *mata sipit* (slanted eyes), but lots of Javanese have those eyes". He went on to tell me that Rio had been teased about it as a kid, often being labeled with the slur '*cina'.*

Late one night at Visinema HQ, I asked some colleagues from the writing and producing teams for recommendations, expecting them to have a much more comprehensive working knowledge of Chindo actors, but they too struggled to think of any that could be a good fit for Lila. What proceeded was a 20-minute debate between themselves over the ethnicities of various Indonesian celebrities, many of whom turned out to be not Chindo at all, but of mixed European or Arab and Indonesian descent. The incidents felt illustrative of the overall ambiguity of race and ethnicity in Indonesia. As Ariel Heryanto writes in *Identity and Pleasure:*

> 'Chinese' Indonesian, like any other ethnicity, is a fiction that never refers unambiguously or consistently to specific individuals or groups of people. Such problematic labelling, plus the extended impunity that perpetrators of violence against minority groups have enjoyed, renders the everyday hostility toward and stigmatization of ethnic Chinese normal. In turn, the normalized discrimination makes it possible for those who dominate the discursive field in state administration and public debate to manipulate the ethnicity of this group into a malleable label, and mobilize flexibly particular meanings of terms such as '*Cina*' (Chinese) or 'non-*pribumi*' (non-natives) according to their interests of the day (2014:137)

In this way, 'Chinese-ness' reproduces the same function in Indonesia as 'Communist', 'Criminal', or even 'Witch' (Siegel 1998; 2006), operating as a master-signifier to rationalize discrimination and violence, often post facto. People are not hated because they are Chinese, as just as with determining who is and isn't a witch, there are no reliable methods for evaluation. Instead, people are Chinese because they are hated.[43]

[43] I've noted the same dynamic playing out once again with anti-LGBT discourses in Indonesia. *Waria*—a term nominally describing male transvestites but also encompassing a wide spectrum of identities and practices from drag

That the fictiveness of ethnicity was becoming such a major factor in the development of our show only made me more motivated to prioritize this aspect of the show. But I was increasingly running out of options. Through extensive research and reaching out to Chindo friends and filmmakers like Lucky Kuswandi, I did ultimately find two other actresses, but both had taken a long break from the industry after their initial debuts in order to raise children, and therefore hadn't appeared in any major films in the past decade, which I was told by Visinema would be impossible for our show, from a marketing perspective. As Taufan put it, our show was a tough sell as it was, and given all the creative risks we were taking, "we need as much star power as possible" to attract viewers. Over months of back-and-forth, I gradually started to get hints from Taufan and Ifan that we might have to think about changing Lila's backstory. I was insistent, and repeatedly said it was a critical aspect of the show and couldn't be altered. But I was admittedly out of my element. I didn't know what was possible, or what I could realistically fight for.

I had found myself participating in what we might call the representation paradox, all too familiar in US media. Certain minority communities like Native Americans are chronically underrepresented in mass media, and even when producers do wish to cast Native actors to star in their projects, they're unable to find any famous enough to draw in a wide audience, leading them to write that identity out of their project, which in turn results in less of Native actors getting large roles and therefore becoming famous enough to draw in an audience, perpetuating the cycle of underrepresentation. If you're Martin Scorsese making *Killers of the Flower Moon* (2023), you can convince your backers (in this case, the deep pockets at Apple) that having

performers to ladyboys to transgender women—have a complicated history in Indonesia, but have often been an accepted or even celebrated part of local cultures. Recently however, the term 'LGBT' has increasingly been deployed strategically to describe a new foreign threat to Indonesia. Whether one is interpellated as a 'waria' or 'LGBT' now is arbitrary and largely dependent on the ideological motivations of the speaker.

Leonardo DiCaprio and Robert De Niro in starring roles—along with the Scorsese brand—is enough to justify casting an excellent but underknown Native actress like Lily Gladstone. But again, with margins being as slim as they are in Indonesia, even a comparatively experimental and forward thinking company like Visinema isn't going to take that risk.

After it became clear that we were not going to find a Chindo actress for the role, I was faced with a difficult choice. I wasn't going to cast a non-Chindo actress and have her play Chindo, as this would not only violate my personal ethics and politics on a fundamental level, but it would also be a disservice to Lila's character to cast someone who couldn't draw from their own experience. Not to mention threatening the believability of the show. I discussed this further with Gabby, who told me she'd be personally devastated if we removed Lila's Chindo background, but that she'd rather we did that than cast a non-Chindo in the role.

In desperation, I posed a third alternative to her. Could we rewrite Lila as *half* Chindo, cast an actress with ambiguous ethnic features—a category which includes nearly everyone—and then make her alienation from her own identity a part of the story? This could in turn create yet another dimension to Lila's conflict with Shanti, who would likely still be cast with an Indo actress. Lila would feel resentment toward Shanti not only for having wealth and therefore a way to (in Lila's mind) transcend her marginalized ethnic identity, but she would also have a sense of belonging that Lila never did, as someone who grew up in that community but didn't share the same physical features as everyone else, leaving her with an imposter syndrome from both sides. Shanti in turn would resent Lila for being able to "pass" in mainstream Indonesian society and choosing not to. She didn't move away to the U.S. just because she had the means to do so, but also because she was tired of living in a society in which she was both seen as a corrupt elite with ill-gotten status, and also not seen at all. I felt like I'd cracked it.

Gabby's reaction was, to put it mildly, dubious. It seemed like we were doing what I had promised we would never do. It wasn't exactly *yellowface*, but it was seriously bordering on, if not crossing directly into, racial impersonation. But then, given the inherent ambiguity and fictiveness of ethnicity in Indonesia (and most places), did that really matter? How could we even know if our selected actress *wasn't* actually Chindo, given the history of assimilation and the clear inability for many Indonesians to tell the difference, as evident in my internet listicle hunt and conversations with Visinema colleagues? "It sounds like you're trying to find an excuse", she told me, somewhat in jest. But she was right, I was rationalizing. Because there was no other way out of this. I floated the idea to the other writers, and for a time it seemed like a potential direction.

Once again, I was ill equipped to argue. Despite my two years of research on the film industry, I couldn't tell you how much a location might cost per day, or the permitting process of shooting up in Bali's volcanic forests (a major site for Andi's psychedelic and horror-tinged vision quest). When I did ask for more clarification and suggest that perhaps we could do something guerilla style, I was assured that things were under control and that Visinema would do everything in their power to make the show work while maintaining "the showrunner's vision". What that vision actually constituted anymore, it was hard to say. And my own ability to provide one as showrunner was becoming increasingly diminished. By the end of the summer of 2023, I had been working on the show for a year and a half. Beyond exceeding my year-long contract, I now needed to return to my primary commitment, the very thing that had landed me into this project: my Ph.D. dissertation. I informed my partners at Visinema that I would still be available if any issues or questions came up during the rewrites, but for the most part I remain in the dark on the project's status.

That said, in the process of writing up the following summer of 2024, I took a glance at the latest script drafts, which had now been reordered, reduced to seven episodes, and largely transformed into a very different story. I searched through them and couldn't find any mention of the word 'Chindo'. In the end, an important and vital subject had been stripped from our series, not because any government censor came in and told us to remove it, not because Visinema wasn't bold or brave enough to address it, and not even because it wasn't relatable or marketable to mainstream audiences. There simply wasn't any money for it.

Epilogue: To Be Continued…

Late one night at Visinema HQ in Jakarta, shortly before I returned to the U.S., I was speaking to a young assistant producer who had just come back to Indonesia from his bachelor's program at the New York Film Academy and had quickly been snatched up by a production house, as with many Indonesians who study abroad. In this case, he'd been tasked with participating in a Skriptura brainstorming development session for a planned Indonesian remake of the BBC comedy series *The Office*, which has now been adapted in 14 countries, most successfully in the U.S., whose version lasted for nine seasons. Each new version acts as a sort of franchise, often translating the original pilot episode into the local language and then building off in their own direction, but never straying far from the central conceit of a faux-documentary following the middle class white collar employees of a regional paper and packaging company. The challenge the team was having, he told me, was locating the right comedic tone for the show. What exactly would people be laughing at?

As someone who'd loved the original when it came out in 2001, this seemed like a no-brainer to me. It's a classic example of "cringe comedy", in which the laughter comes from identifying with the singularly painful and universal experience of embarrassing oneself in front of one's peers, often due to a lack of self-awareness or tact. Each of the characters in the titular office represent a distinct variety of social failure—the inept boss who tries too hard to be liked by his younger employees, the sycophantic geek who worships the ground he walks on, or the (semi-)functioning alcoholic who gets a little too loose at company parties. Why not do what other countries have done, and just localize those archetypes?

"That doesn't work here," he told me. "We don't like seeing people feel shame. That's actually really uncomfortable and sad for us." But isn't there comedy in that discomfort, I ask? Isn't it a cathartic release to see our own insecurities and weaknesses reflected in characters onscreen? To universalize that experience so we don't feel so much shame about it? "Not in Indonesia," he told me. "We can laugh at a silly guy falling on his ass, but nobody wants to see him try his best and fail".

Unhappy Art

I started this dissertation with an epigraph quoting the Russian director Andrei Tarkovsky, about film's dependence on money making it an inherently "unhappy" art form. In that same interview, he goes on to lament the need to market films as if they were cigarettes, claiming it's impossible to make "poetical" or "good" films for the masses. In a separate interview, he defined his own creative purpose as "[making] films that will help people to live, even if they sometimes cause unhappiness" (Christie 1981). I resonate with both sentiments, as an unhappy artist who relishes in unhappy art (and unhappy feelings). That said, I'd never intended for *Ubudians* to make anyone unhappy. But throughout the development process, and especially reflecting back today, it did feel often that I was doing just that.

During my writeup of this dissertation, I rewatched the recording of my initial *Ubudians* pitch to Angga at Visinema HQ. I'd remembered everyone in the room being enthralled and in hysterics throughout the entire presentation. Upon review, people are certainly laughing in the first third or so, as I introduce the story world and a brief rundown of the synopsis. But the energy gradually wanes as I get further into the conceptual weeds of the underlying neocolonial critique. Even Angga loses focus at one point, checking his phone as I rattle on about the false

promises of cryptocurrencies, the increasing interest in online investing among young Indonesian men, and how we'd use new age spiritual beliefs in Ubud as a deconstructive metaphor. Someone can be heard yawning offscreen.

Frequently during meetings in the script revision phase, the team might find itself getting into a spirited debate over a plot point, like whether Lila, having gone home with a dashing Indo-European man from the polyamory party named Marvin, should come just shy of crossing the "no sex" boundary established with Andi earlier that night, or if she should actually just cheat on her husband, raising the dramatic stakes. The writers and producers would be going back and forth, imagining various scandalous outcomes. What if this love triangle continues into the following episodes? What if Lila gets pregnant? Maybe the season ends with a pregnancy test, but we don't know whose baby it is!

Then I'd chime in with my big picture reframing, as the showrunner. The one with "the vision". Whether Lila does or doesn't sleep with Marvin is beside the point, I'd say. Lila doesn't actually *desire* Marvin. Her desire comes from wanting to *be* Marvin. Given his wealth, his ethnicity, and his gender, she'd have lived the kind of life he had, studying international law at Oxford, traveling the world working in conflict zones, fighting for human rights. But this wasn't a life path that she was ever presented with, as a middle class Chinese-Indonesian woman. And while she's intoxicated by the presence of such a man, she's also resentful of him. Of all that he is, that she can never be. Or maybe she still can. That's what she's on a journey to discover.

And while I felt like I'd just hit on some kind of major connection, a rearticulation of a core theme that could help us all drive the story forward, what I'd instead done is sucked all the energy out of the room. Almost every time I did this, the immediate response would be dead silence. A sudden halt in the rally. The first couple instances, I thought it was because everyone

was just processing what I'd said. But eventually it occurred to me that my articulations, my big grant points, just weren't anything my collaborators wanted to explore. Was I projecting? Surely not. I'd known plenty of Indonesians who felt this way upon meeting foreigners with privilege. In some cases, very close friends have felt safe enough to express resentment toward me for the kind of life I was born into. But while this may be a powerful and important feeling worthy of analysis, it may simply be too unhappy to portray in popular media.

A major part of my intention in creating this show and this dissertation was to explore the possibilities and limitations for applied anthropological and social theory in cross-cultural artistic collaboration. When considering my value to *Ubudians* as a producer and showrunner, I knew that I would never be able to write an entire story or screenplay about Indonesians for Indonesians, as I didn't feel capable of inhabiting their subjectivity. What I could do, I believed, was to provide a conceptual and thematic framework for the series, a sandbox of questions and critiques that the writing staff could fill in with their own answers and ideas.

But that sandbox itself may have been too limiting, too rooted as it was in my own habitus, cultivated through a lifetime spent building cultural capital through obsession with the avant garde, the esoteric, and the critical. In fact, my interest in anthropology—and in surrealism—derived from the value system I'd developed early in life, searching for radical alterity, rupture, disjuncture, and contradiction. Always picking and peeling away at the layers of society, identity, subjectivity, and existence.

I've come to view Western modernities as a series of rapid (and ongoing) processes of categorization and specialization under the epistemic regimes of post-enlightenment rationalism. And my critique of colonialism (and neocolonialism) is of the imposition of those regimes onto other societies and culture—whether through coercion or commerce—and how this has led to a

flattening of the world and a limitation of the vastness of human potential. And yet, here I was, a Westerner, attempting to transcend the confining logic of Western rationalism using the epistemological tools of deconstructive analysis and surrealism that I'd learned in the Western academy, encouraging non-Westerners to adopt them, despite not really resonating much with them at all.

The absurdity of my situation did not escape me. The show I wanted to make was largely about questioning and critiquing Orientalized representations of Bali, as well as ideologies of capitalism, patriarchy, and racial hierarchies imposed through colonialism and globalization, and I saw this as constituting a "decolonial" project. But by attempting to impose this as a foreigner, I ended up creating a similar dynamic to that described by Gayatri Spivak (2010). Granted, this story wasn't exactly about "the subaltern". Nor was this a case where I wanted to speak for anyone. But I'd nonetheless created a limitation that was forcing my colleagues to speak in the way I wanted. To be clear, I'm not saying this as a total negation of my role in the project. As I said in the introduction, I believe the foreign anthropologist can serve an important role as an antagonist, or a catalyst. So too can the foreign artist. In fact, foreign antagonists are frequently celebrated within Indonesian cinema.

Gareth Evans' *Merantau* (2009) and *The Raid: Redemption* (2011), were landmark films which not only helped revive the nearly moribund Indonesian action genre, but also reinvigorated the popularity of the native martial art of *pencak silat*, with a new generation of young Indonesians (and Malaysians) learning about the practice[44] through newly household

[44] Granted, Evans and his silat collaborators accomplished this feat not through appealing to strict authenticity, but rather by fusing traditional silat movements—far too graceful and ballet-like for contemporary action viewers—with high-impact MMA (mixed martial arts) as well as dynamic handheld cinematography. Interestingly, this particular fusion has now come back to influence American action cinema, with the *Raid* series' fingerprints clearly visible in the fight choreography of the *John Wick* films or Marvel blockbusters like *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (the directors of both films have cited *The Raid* as a major inspiration).

names like Iko Uwais and Yayan Ruhian. After the films were released, Uwais and Yayan started their own stunt choreography teams and schools, and their disciples have quickly become the go-to experts for a new generation of action filmmakers, including Angga Sasongko. Uwais himself has become something of an international superstar, much like other regional martial arts heroes like Thailand's Tony Jaa or China's Jet Li, appearing in major Hollywood films and the acclaimed Netflix action series *Wu Assassins*.

In 2012 and 2014, director Joshua Oppenheimer released *The Act of Killing* and *The Look of Silence*, which are not only widely considered to be among the finest documentaries of all time, and groundbreaking exercises in blending narrative forms, but were also instrumental in bringing renewed international and local attention to the mass killings of 1965-66. As with *The Raid,* it can often be frustrating that the Indonesian films most recognized internationally seem to be those produced by foreigners. But when I've brought this up to Indonesians, they point out that such a film would have been nearly impossible for them to create, given the oppressive code of silence that still hangs over that chapter of history.

Oppenheimer himself has said that he'll likely never be able to return safely to Indonesia, and the subject of his films, Adi, has had to relocate his family to a different part of the archipelago, where they are "no longer living around people who have been threatening us for 50 years" and "no longer feel afraid". While screenings of the films (especially the first) inside Indonesia were frequently met with intimidation by local police or paramilitary groups, they nonetheless, to quote Adi, "opened a space that never existed before, and led to an enormous acknowledgment of the suffering and prison of silence and fear we'd been living in".

There can be an impulse, when seeing a foreign filmmaker win prestigious awards by telling the story of a horrific tragedy his own nation was complicit in, to view it cynically as a

form of exploitation. But Rukun feels the opposite way. “I honestly used Joshua to expose the terrible ongoing effects of the genocide today,” Mr. Rukun said. “I’ve apologized to Joshua for this, and I’ve apologized again for taking up his entire youth to express my mother’s pain and the horror of her stories.”

This isn't to suggest that Oppenheimer himself feels either of these things. Having spoken with him at Harvard, it’s clearly a formative period of his life that he wouldn’t trade away (not to mention the career it’s offered him). I simply mean to demonstrate that international artistic collaboration, particularly between members of a rich country and a poor country, involves some sense of "using" one another. And I tried to be conscious of that when entering into *Ubudians*. I wanted, in a sense, for my cultural capital to be useful to others where it could be, and ignored where it couldn’t be. The main thing that complicated that was my position as creator and showrunner, which granted me undue authority that was confusing both to myself and to everyone else. I’ve thought about whether, if I could have done things differently, I might have establishing a more even playing field between the various members of the team by positioning myself as a script editor or cultural advisor. But then again, perhaps the antagonist needs a certain amount of authority to be an effective catalyst, and one must simply live in the discomfort of that position.

Lost in Translation

One key failure on my part which I can own—though not for lack of trying—was falling short in achieving total fluency in the Indonesian language. This is of course not an uncommon feeling for anthropologists. We pride ourselves on fully immersing ourselves in the local language, which ironically only brings into stark relief how little we actually comprehend. Even

that term—*fluency*—is a slippery and subjective one. As a foreigner, speaking even a single compound or complex sentence to an Indonesian in their language will often elicit an immediate reaction of glee and wonder, as if having just seen a magic trick, followed by the response *"udah lancar!"* ("already fluent!"). This stems from the exceedingly low expectations for foreigners to ever invest time in studying the language beyond a basic functional level, unless married to an Indonesian and wanting to communicate better with their in-laws. This too has been explained to me as another manifestation of Indonesia's "inferiority complex". After all, conversations about complex political or social issues end up borrowing lots of loanwords from English anyway, so why not just stick to that if possible?

Almost any anthropologist would reject this attitude. Language, after all, does not simply serve a semantico-referential purpose, but carries a whole range of additional social functions (Jakobson 1960). The poetic function in particular is central to creative expression, be it through writing, comedy, fine art, or film. As previously discussed in the section on Jogja Surrealism in Chapter 4, punning and wordplay are everyday linguistic practices, which make their way into art, whose surrealist nature can then be rendered imperceivable to foreigners, even those "fluent" in Indonesian.

Consider too the alternate meaning of *lancar*: "smooth", somewhat mirroring the etymology of "fluent", derived from words referring to fluidity or flow. In most daily interactions, my conversations Indonesian were smooth and frictionless. But when it came to collaborative art-making or dreaming, things often broke down. Observations, jokes, or social critiques that worked in English didn't work in Indonesian, or vice versa. Certain lines of dramatic dialogue, when translated in my head to English, sounded overly terse or unexpressive, when in fact the context in which the line was being spoken (and the facial expression and tone

of the actor who would be speaking it) gave it a surfeit of meaning that I, having not heard it enough times in my life to be struck by the incongruity, simply could not perceive. Conversely, lines I'd written for foreign characters meant to comedically (and acerbically) highlight patronizing attitudes toward Balinese society, instead came across to my Indonesian counterparts as earnest and sweet, a display of genuine care or curiosity.

I didn't have the time, nor truly the theoretical expertise, to do a linguistic analysis of the development of *Ubudians* for the sake of this dissertation, but I strongly believe that doing so could reveal quite a bit more about the challenges we experienced in envisioning this story together. If a linguistic anthropologist ever reads this and wants to get in touch, I'd be happy to collaborate or share our multitude of episode drafts and revisions, which together form a rich body of material for close study. To say nothing of the fact that the scripts were also translated back and forth between English and Indonesian multiple times throughout the process, losing or gaining semiotic complexity with each iteration.

It's the Economy, Stupid

In the early stages of writing this dissertation, while reflecting on and analyzing my fieldnotes, I periodically become stuck in a state of almost total paralysis as it felt that every question that I wanted to ask about Indonesian cinema had what seemed to be an overly simple, reductive answer: there just isn't enough money. This point had come up often during my previous year of fieldwork observing the productions of Angga's *Mencuri Raden Saleh* and Anggi's *24 Jam Bersama Gaspar.*

Why are on-set working conditions so brutal for below-the-line crew members, and why is it so difficult to raise those standards, either through government regulation or collective labor

organizing? Because, I'm often told, it would make instantly movies—barely profitable as they are—nearly impossible to produce. Exploitation is a necessary prerequisite for this expensive art form, and any alternative mode of production is unimaginable.

Why do almost no films feature what I'd understood to be essential roles like production designers—charged with conceptualizing and envisioning the overall look of a film's physical environment—or stunt coordinators—who oversee all aspects of stunt work, from hand-to-hand combat and prop firearms to car chases and explosions? Because producers didn't see the need of hiring an additional specialist, so long as those tasks could be delegated to directors and fight choreographers[45], respectively.

The question works just as well on the scale of mass society. When I described the "screenwriter bottleneck" problem to my mother, she responded by asking me why the government doesn't invest more in creative writing programs at a university or secondary school level. Putting aside the dysfunction of Indonesia's education system and of the political system that would need to facilitate such an investment, the answer is that the money just isn't there, or rather it's been diverted to more "essential" projects like infrastructure.

I grappled for a long time with how this observation, not remotely novel, could even be useful. There already exists a mountain of world-systems and Marxist analysis for explaining why certain places or peoples are poor and others are rich, and why this means there are some things that can only be done in rich places, by rich people. But not all of scientific research is about discovering something new. In fact, much if not most is simply aimed at reaffirming

[45] This has also been a major concern for Angga, who has aspired to mentor his fight choreographers in learning international standards and practices for stunt work to become coordinators, while at the same time encouraging them to train their own assistants to replace them as choreographers. But at an industry-wide scale, this kind of investment in developing talent is rare.

existing theories. The more we can do that, the more credible those theories become, and the more we can feel comfortable relying on them.

At the same time, it's one thing to know that something is true, it's another to understand how it works, and what its effects are. We know that gravity exists, so how does it affect ocean currents, and how has that affected the evolution of marine life? I know that capitalism and global inequality exist. So I wanted to understand how they manifest in the Indonesian film industry, especially with regard to self-conscious attempts to build a national film identity through experimentation. And, on a phenomenological level, I wanted to understand how it feels to dream, and have those dreams fail to materialized, due to limitations imposed by structures outside of your control. Because there are countless downstream effects of these limitations. Beyond disincentivizing experimentation, they also inhibit risk taking, not just economically, but politically and socially. They impact who can be represented in mass culture, and how the past can be grappled with, if it can at all.

But I nevertheless have hope, in figures like Angga Sasongko and the rest of Visinema. While just as bound by these limitations as anyone else, their refusal to surrender to them has continually inspired me, and is what gave me the confidence to try my own hand at pushing the mainstream bubble outward. Myself and my collaborators allowed ourselves to dream something new and force it into existence, budget be damned. And maybe we lost that battle. But like Richard Oh said to me, the war never ends. Which from a certain perspective is pessimistic, but from another offers hope that there’s always another chance to try again.

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