

The International Conference on Communication and Media 2014 (i-COME'14), 18-20 October 2014, Langkawi, MALAYSIA

Visualizing Islamic Law and Values in *Semerah Padi* (1956): P. Ramlee as Cinematographic Auteur

Nurul Ezzati Aisya Mohd Zaki^{a*}, Che Su Mustaffa^a, Noer Doddy Irmawati^b

^a*School of Multimedia Technology and Communication, Universiti Utara Malaysia, Kedah, Malaysia*

^b*English Education Postgraduate Program, Universitas Ahmad Dahlan, Yogyakarta, Indonesia*

Abstract

In film studies, the Auteur Theory is mainly employed to explore film directors' signature styles in creating their mastery artifacts. Individual style of a director in filmmaking is based on his/her preferences; genre, theme, mise-en-scène, cinematography or even casts line-up. Grounded by American auteur scholar, Andrew Sarris's idea of 'how' in style and techniques a director conveys 'what' in film storytelling, this paper looks at P. Ramlee's cinematographic style in expressing Islamic notion in his 1956 film, *Semerah Padi*. Qualitative content analysis was conducted on the film in order to identify P. Ramlee's cinematographic tendencies and by taking up a semiotics approach; the researcher interpreted and discussed his distinctive style as an auteur stured filmmaker.

© 2014 The Authors. Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>).

Peer-review under responsibility of School of Multimedia Technology & Communication, Universiti Utara Malaysia.

Keywords: Film studies; cinematography; auteur; P. Ramlee; Islamic films

1. Introduction

Close to six decades ago, Malaya (now Malaysia) film industry was at its peak, the Golden Era. The mid-fifties and sixties saw film enthusiasts taking on the director's seats and for the first time Malaysians watched films by local directors namely M. Amin, Hussin Haniff, Jamil Sulong, Omar Rojik and P. Ramlee (Muhammad Hatta, 2003;

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +600175377174
E-mail address: ezzatzaki@gmail.com

Zaedi, 2009). Allahyarham Tan Sri Dr. Teuku Zakaria bin Teuku Nyak Puteh or widely known as P. Ramlee was one of the engine roving the Golden Era, among others. Since 1948, P. Ramlee was only known as the great actor, singer, composer, song writer and musician. However, the Shaw Brothers of Malay Film Productions (MFP) took a risk and let then 26 years old P. Ramlee, to direct his first feature. *Penarek Becha* (1955) was P. Ramlee's directorial debut and movie-goers stamped local theaters nationwide to take part in the movie history (Zaedi, 2009).

In 1959, the international film arena finally recognized Malaya as a raising power house in Asia film industry and awarded *Pendekar Bujang Lapok* (1959) at the 6th Asian Film Festival for Best Comedy. It was a start to many more awards and international recognitions. Through P. Ramlee's third heavy-drama, *Ibu Mertua-ku* (1963), he was awarded The Most Versatile Talent at the 10th Asia-Pacific Film Festival in Tokyo, a first award of its kind specially dedicated for P. Ramlee.

1.1. Islam representations in films

Islam has been represented in films throughout the world and was visualized differently in diverse cultural context (Sjö, 2013). According to Sjö (2013), western film productions for the most part never failed to represent Islam and Muslims in pejorative manners for nearly a century now. Nevertheless, Islamic film moguls Iran and Indonesia are giving justice to the misrepresented Islam through films such as *Children of Heaven* (1997), *A Time for Drunken Horses* (2000), *Baran* (2000), *The Lizard* (2004), *The Song of Sparrows* (2008), *Ketika Cinta Bertasbih* (2009), *Emak Ingin Naik Haji* (2009), *Dalam Mihrab Cinta* (2010), etc. This encouraging surge of Islamic themed films had scholars visiting and analyzing these films in order to make known different views of Islam in varying cultural context and understanding filmmakers' motivations in producing such films (Muhamad Zaki, Ainurliza, Zainol Abidin & Noor Adzrah, 2011; Pittman, 2012; Rosmawati, 2012; Sander, 2013; Sjö, 2013; Smets, 2012).

However, Rosmawati (2012) argues that Islamic film genre is very scarce in Malay film industry to the point of 'almost non-existence' (p. 152). During the Golden Era of Malay films, local production studios put little attention toward religious genre and only a handful Islamic themed film were produced, including *Semerah Padi* (1956). *Semerah Padi* was P. Ramlee's second film as director and remains to this day as one of his best work (Hamsan, 2004; Mustafar A. R. & Aziz Sattar, 2009). P. Ramlee's directorial forte was exceptional and as a new director, to challenge a new genre on its own puts him on a much higher strata compared to other directors of his time (Muhamad Zaki, Ainurliza, Zainol Abidin & Nor Adzrah, 2011). The silence of this genre was only rouse again in 2000 when *Syukur 21* was released, but unexpectedly got rather disappointing receptions by local moviegoers. Only in 2008, *Syurga Cinta* paved the way for Islamic theme into Malaysian mainstream film industry and had gained steady followers amongst local moviegoers today (Rosmawati, Md. Salleh, Mohd. Nizam & Muhammad Sham, 2012).

1.2. Auteur theory

Through an article titled *The Birth of a New Avant-garde* in 1948, Alexander Astruc induced an idea that a film director is the 'author' of his medium and the camera as his 'pen' (Ben-Shaul, 2007; Pickering, 2010; Stam, 2000). Auteur theory, as the idea later known, promotes the concept that a director with individual stylistic skills produces recognizable and distinctive films compare to other directors' (Pramaggiore & Wallis, 2011). According to André Bazin, these individualistic styles are intuitive personal elements that are infused by directors, consciously or unconsciously, into their films (Pickering, 2010; Stam, 2000). As arguments on auteurs (directors) progresses, so did articles on their aesthetic values which filled the pages of France popular film journal, *Cahiers du cinema*, especially the like of Hollywood's John Ford, Orson Welles and Fritz Lang. Nevertheless, not until 1962 that auteur theory planted its footing in American film industry and academia (later globally), when Andrew Sarris wrote *Notes on Auteur Theory*. Sarris (1962) proposed three criteria of an auteur: (1) technically competence, (2) has distinguished personality, and (3) the auteur's body of work share an interior meaning, defined as an underlying tension between director's vision and the subject matter. Yet, Sarris's third criterion was not defined plainly and later described by Pramaggiore and Wallis (2011) as a "continuing elaborating of a director's perspective on the world through the treatment of themes" (p. 409). Fig. 1 shows the dynamic of an auteur by Sarris.

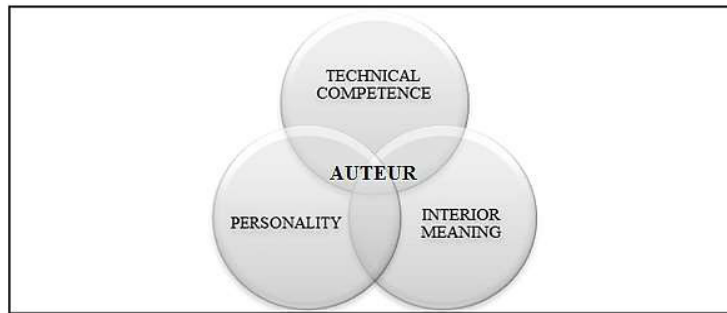


Fig. 1. Sarris's auteur criteria.

Sarris's auteurism redirects the question of 'what' in a story or theme, to 'how' in style and techniques. These style and techniques allude directors' personality, ideology and idiosyncrasy (Stam, 2000). Techniques and style were emphasized by Sarris as essential in auteur theory and argued that "if a director has no technical competence, no elementary flair for the cinema, he is automatically cast out from the pantheon of directors. "A great director (auteur) has to be at least a good director" (Sarris, 1962, p. 1). Thus, founded by Sarris's idea, today studies on auteurs are expanded toward directors' technical finesses on colour, lighting, mise-en-scène, cinematography, etc. Watson (2012) also suggested that the emergence of authorship had allowed artistic and academic legitimacy of cinema as a form of traditional arts, which qualify intellectual inspections and interpretation on films style. Thus, clearly differentiated individual films and filmmakers' artistic merit.

1.3. Semiotics takes on cinematographic film language

As part of an on-going study on cinematography semiotics in P. Ramlee's films, the researcher had conducted an analysis on one of P. Ramlee most memorable film, *Semerah Padi* (1956). *Semerah Padi* as emphasized by Hamsan (2004) is categorized as a heavy-drama and therefore able to clearly demonstrate the director's orientation in technical aspects and meaning making through his authority and cinematography choices.

Based on Philipp Mayring's qualitative content analysis, the researcher deductively developed a cinematography semiotics coding agenda to work on an array of films. The coding agenda was developed by first defining theoretically aspects of analysis, main categories and sub categories with respect to the research questions. Once all the aspects defined, the next step was to collect them in a coding agenda. The coding agenda later used to analyze sample texts. Lastly, the results were interpreted and served as answers for the research questions posted in the beginning of the study.

According to Monaco (2009), visual storytelling is a blend of conceptual tools which communicate cinematic language or film syntax, created by director through the process of filmmaking. Hence, film syntax is a systematic guide to understanding cinematographic tools in generating meanings. Biemann (n.d.) also described film language (syntax) as an orchestrated cinematography techniques mainly camera frame, angles, distance and movement. The relationship between diachronic and synchronic was also explained by film semiotic guru, Christian Metz. Metz (1974) argued that semiotics' connotations have placed cinema as art, while camera framing, camera movement and lighting combines to create denotation meanings. In truth, other than mere techniques in capturing stories to the silver screens, cinematography is indeed a director's flair, enclosed with semiotics elements to gives impact to the level of connotation (Lau, 2000). Ultimately, the researcher came up with a coding agenda which consist of two cinematography aspects; camera movement (diachronic) and camera space (synchronic).

2. Islamic law and values in *Semerah Padi*

Naim (2011) asserted that an Islamic film should impose elements which represent Islam and its law and values, regardless of volume and frequency throughout the film. These elements such as messages of self-surrender, obedience and faith toward Allah s.w.t. can be portray in film's narrative, cinematography, semiotics, technical

application and context. P. Ramlee’s *Semerah Padi* narrative was grounded by the Holy Quran and Islamic law and values which were governed by a leader called Tok Penghulu or Village Chief (Anuar Nor Arai, 2003; Hamsan, 2004; Mohd Yusof & Amran, 2006).

Overall, there are nine scenes depicting Islamic law being observed and enforced by the character Tok Penghulu. The scenes are as follow:

Table 1. Islamic scenes in *Semerah Padi*.

Film structure	Scene
Beginning	Taruna and Dara’s engagement.
	Upon hearing Galak and Jejaka adultery, Tok Penghulu summoned Aduka and Taruna to capture them.
	Caught, both Galak and Jejaka were trialed by Tok Penghulu.
	Galak and Jejaka punished for their sins of adultery and murder of Kachiwa, Galak’s husband.
	Tok Penghulu solved feud between two villagers.
Middle	Tok Penghulu addressed the villagers of the devastating attack and chaos erupted by Borek and his men in <i>Semerah Padi</i> .
	Tok Penghulu punished Borek’s men for their sinful act.
	Aduka confessed to Taruna of his adultery with Dara.
End	Tok Penghulu sentenced flogging for both Aduka and Dara
	Aduka and Dara’s punishment.

Based on Douglass and Harnden (1996) film structure, *Semerah Padi* (1956) was divided into three parts of beginning, middle and end. As the study concentrated on technical aspects of filmmaking, the researcher dissected each scene (beginning, middle and end) into separate shots respectively. Though combination of shots generates meaning, shot is film simplest unit that able to demonstrate cinematography techniques (Biemann, n.d.). By reading each uninterrupted/uncut shots, motion or static (Speidel, 2012), the researcher identified P. Ramlee’s cinematographic tendencies. In order to validate the coding agenda, the analysis was also monitored and ran by two other independent intercoders. Utilizing NVivo 10 qualitative research software, the research operated Coding Comparison Query on all three analyses findings which resulted in a validation of 0.898. Below is the Coding Comparison Query result.

Table 2. Coding Comparison Query on intercoders findings.

All nodes	0.898
Camera movement (Diachronic)	0.913
Camera space (Synchronic)	0.882

3. Findings and discussions

The results of P. Ramlee’s cinematography style in both diachronic and synchronic are shown in Fig. 2, 3 and 4 respectively. *Semerah Padi* was P. Ramlee’s second film and remarked as one of his best work. It was observed so because it was P. Ramlee’s first attempt in venturing out of Indian films template as most film those days were (Hamsan, 2004; Jins, 2004; Muhammad, 2003; Mustafa A. R. & Aziz Satar, 2008; Zaedi, 2009). The film brought forth the traditional Malay community and their Islamic faith as its core theme (Hamsan, 2004). The character Tok Penghulu, played by the late Daeng Idris successfully portrayed a firm and pious leader whereby throughout 92 minutes of the film, nine scenes were depicting the Tok Penghulu practicing Islamic law in solving village feuds, moral issues and external threats.

3.1. Diachronic shots

Fig. 2 illustrates diachronic shots used by P. Ramlee in *Semerah Padi*'s visual storytelling. Based on the graph generated by NVivo 10, dolly out shots were used heavily at 18.07% out of overall diachronic shots in three main parts of the film.

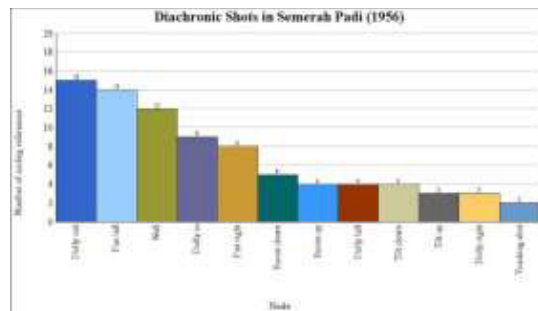


Fig. 2. P. Ramlee's diachronic shots in *Semerah Padi* (1956).

In *Semerah Padi*, P. Ramlee frequently used dolly shots in scenes featuring the Tok Penghulu enforcing Islamic law and values. In 1950s Malayan film industry any form of camera movement was perceived as heavy duty since in those days the camera was behind in technology (Shaw Brothers got second hand equipments from the Hong Kong Shaw studio) and bulky, thus moving these 'machinery' was a feat on its own (Muhammad Hatta, 2003). Regardless, P. Ramlee took pride in the Islamic values that he accentuated them in various diachronic shots throughout the film.



Fig. 3. A scene of Tok Penghulu enforcing Islamic law.

The above is an example of how P. Ramlee used cinematography techniques in stressing the connotation of Islamic law and values in *Semerah Padi*. Fig. 3. shows a scene where P. Ramlee employed dolly shots of Tok Penghulu enforcing Islamic law and values on his subjects. In this particular scene, dolly left and pan right were simultaneously used in framing Tok Penghulu.

3.2. Synchronic shots

Both Fig. 4 and 5 show P. Ramlee's tendency in utilizing synchronic shots in his film. Synchronic refers to the space in which the camera frames the actions taking place (Monaco, 2009). Based on Fig. 4, it can be easily observe that P. Ramlee framed most actions in medium shot (MS) and constantly placing characters together in an orderly fashion by the dozens. P. Ramlee repeatedly showcased solidarity in *Kampung Semerah Padi*, raising the theme of unity in a traditional Malay community. Though a greenhorn in directing, P. Ramlee displayed maturity and attentiveness in utilizing eye level angles and remained to do so whether the characters were sitting down or standing up. Living up to his reputation, P. Ramlee carefully used more expressive synchronic shots such as high angle, low angle and Dutch shot in crucial scenes in the film. Unlike other Shaw Brothers' directors, P. Ramlee boldly used Dutch shot in the climax scene whereby the character Aduka confessed of committing adultery with Taruna's fiancée, Dara.

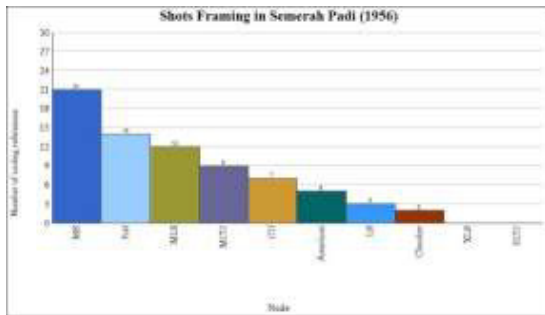


Fig. 4. P. Ramlee's framing in Semerah Padi (1956).

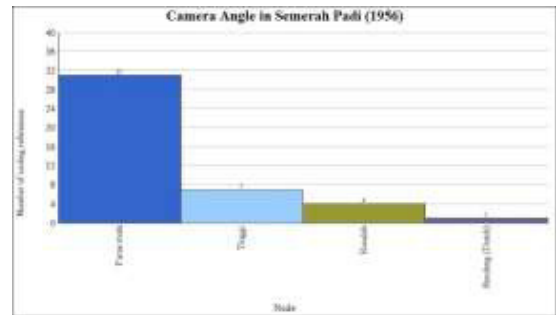


Fig. 5. P. Ramlee's camera angles in Semerah Padi (1956).

4. Conclusion

In *Semerah Padi*, P. Ramlee's cinematography techniques were showcased in multiple scenes consistently throughout the film. True to the Islamic and feudal Malay customs theme of the film, P. Ramlee exploited conventions constructed in visualizing Islamic law and values. P. Ramlee's years behind and in front of the camera had packed him with knowledge to the art of filmmaking. Initially, the studio system of 1950s Malayan film industry shaped how films should be back then. Foreign directors especially those from India were hired by the Shaw Brothers of MFP; directing films in their Bollywood and Mollywood ways, where P. Ramlee picked up his filmmaking know-hows. Hence, there's no surprise that P. Ramlee's editorial debut *Penarek Becha* was a perfect template of Indian cinema. Though *Penarek Becha* was P. Ramlee's first film, his second film *Semerah Padi* unveiled his distinctive style, technical competencies and personality, thus making him as Sarris would say 'a great director'. P. Ramlee exploited diachronic and synchronic camera movements in assisting the audience eyes (and understanding) and was not solely depending on the film narrative, demonstrating his technical storytelling skills surpassing those in his era. Thus, by obliging to all three of the auteur criteria presented by Sarris, P. Ramlee was indeed a cinematographic auteur.

References

- Anuar Nor Arai. (2003). P. Ramlee: aspek kemasyarakatan, sinematografi dan pengarahannya dalam filem 'Semerah Padi', 'Antara Dua Darjat' dan 'Ibu Mertua-ku'. In Rahani Jamil, Abdul Latiff Abu Bakar & Ahmad Abd. Kadir (Eds.), *P. Ramlee: Seniman Agung Dunia Melayu: Himpunan Kertas Kerja Simposium Karya Seni Seniman Agung P. Ramlee* (pp. 125-156). Kuala Lumpur: Arkib Negara Malaysia.
- Ben-Shaul, N. S. (2007). *Film: The key concepts*. New York, NY: Berg Publishers.
- Bieman, C. (n.d.). *Semiotics analysis of films*. Retrieved from <http://www.mauschristoph.de/biographie/english-version/semiotic-analysis-of-films/index.php>.
- Douglass, J. S., & Harnden, G. P. (1996). *The art of technique: An aesthetic approach to film and video production*. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Hamsan Mohamed. (2004). Pengarahan dan sinematografi P. Ramlee dan Hussein Haniff. Kuala Lumpur: Penerbitan Universiti Malaya.
- Jins Shamsuddin. (2004). Karya seni filem Seniman Agung P. Ramlee – Satu penilaian. In Rahani Jamil, Abdul Latiff Abu Bakar & Ahmad Abd. Kadir (Eds.), *P. Ramlee: Seniman Agung Dunia Melayu: Himpunan Kertas Kerja Simposium Karya Seni Seniman Agung P. Ramlee* (pp. 195-202). Kuala Lumpur: Arkib Negara Malaysia.
- Lau, M. L. K. H. (2000). *Content analysis on the ideology of the Hollywood science fiction*. (Unpublished doctorate dissertation). Universiti Sains Malaysia.
- Metz, C. (1974). *Film language: A semiotics of the cinema*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Metz, C. (1975). Identification, mirror. In Mast, Cohen & Braudy (Eds.), *Film theory and criticism* (pp. 730-740). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Mohd Yusof Hussain & Amran Baharum. (2006). Media in traditional Malay society. In Mohd Yusof Hussain (Ed.), *Media & Muslim Society* (pp. 73-86). Kuala Lumpur: Ampang Press Sdn. Bhd.
- Monaco, J. (2010). *How to read a film: Movie, media and beyond*. NY: Oxford University Press.
- Muhammad Hatta Muhammad Tabut. (2003). Kandungan dan teknik: Unsur-unsur yang mempengaruhi filem tempatan. In Ramli Mohamed (Ed.), *Sinema dan Penontonan di Malaysia* (pp. 26-44). P. Pinang: Penerbitan Universiti Sains Malaysia.
- Muhamad Zaki Mustafa, Ainurliza Mat Rahim, Zainol Abidin, & Noor Adzrah Ramlee. (2011). Konsep feminisme Islam di dalam filem 'Ketika Cinta Bertasbih'. *Jurnal Al-Tamaddun*, 5, 131-147.
- Mustafa A. R., & Aziz Satar. (2008). *Filem-filem P. Ramlee, Malaysia: D'reka DigiArt & PrintShoppe*.

- Naim Ahmad. (2011). *Filem Islam satu perbicaraan*. Shah Alam: Uni-N Production Sdn. Bhd.
- Pickering, S. (2010). *The Chicago School of Media Theory: Auteur*. Retrieved from <http://www.lucian.uchicago.edu>.
- Pittman, M. (2012). Majid Majidi and Baran: Iranian cinematic poetics and the spiritual poverty of Rumi. *Journal of Religion & Film*, 15(2), Article 4.
- Pramaggiore, M., & Wallis, T. (2008). *Film: A critical introduction* (2nd ed.). Boston: Pearson.
- Rosmawati Mohamad Rasif. (2012). The position of religious Malays films in Malaysia from the perspective of Islamic da'wah. *Jurnal al-Hikmah*, 4, 148-160.
- Rosmawati Mohamad Rasif, Md. Salleh Hj. Hassan, Mohd. Nizam Osman, & Muhammad Sham Shahkat Ali. (2012). Relationship of viewing Islamic based films with pro-social personality among teenaged audience. *Malaysia Journal of Communication*, 28(1), 107-120.
- Sander, D. (2013). Love that tames: Anti-heroes, power and Islamic reform reflected in two Iranian films. *Journal of Religion & Film*, 17(2), Article 4.
- Sarris, A. (1962). Notes on the auteur theory in 1962. *Film Culture*, 27, 1-8.
- Sjö, S. (2013). Go with Peace Jamil – Affirmation and challenge of the image of the Muslim man. *Journal of Religious & Film*, 17(2), Article 8.
- Smets, K. (2012). Connecting Islam and film culture: The reception of *The Message (Ar Risalah)* among the Moroccan diaspora. *Journal of Audience and Reception Studies*, 9(1), 68-94.
- Speidel, S. (2012). Film form and narrative. In Nelmes, J. (Ed.), *Introduction to film studies* (5th ed.). (pp. 79-112). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Stam, R. (2000). *Film theory: An introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Watson, P. (2012). Cinematic authorship and the film auteur. In J. Nelmes (Ed.), *Introduction to Film Studies* (5th ed.) (pp. 142-164). London: Routledge.
- Zaedi Zolkafli. (2011). *Koleksi P. Ramlee*, Kuala Lumpur: Per. Sinaran Matahari.