

The Ideology Behind Art Criticism

Universal Humanism

Vs. Socialist Realism:

A Conflict of Concepts that Divides the
Indonesian Cultural Scene.

Poster

“Boeng, Ajo Boeng!”

(“Brother, C’mon, Brother!”)

1945

The first collaboration between painter (Affandi) and poet (Chairil Anwar) for political purposes: Indonesian people have to defend the independence of the Republic of Indonesia.

“Art for the People”?

What types of artists were Affandi and Chairil Anwar?



Chairil Anwar's Poem

“

*I'm the wild animal
excluded from the
community*

.....”

(1943)



Affandi's Self-Portrait:

The Uglier the Face the Higher the Price ('couldn't be understood by the working class').

1958



1960



Universal Humanism?

Gelanggang's Statement of 1950 (Surat Kepercayaan Gelanggang)

We are the legitimate inheritors of world culture and we are going to continue this culture with our own way. We were born from the people and the meaning of the people for us is the blending of anything from which a new world could be born / The Indonesian culture is built by the unity of many stimulating voices that are caused by the rebound voice, in the form of our voice / The revolution for us is to put new values on old values that should be destroyed / In our findings, maybe we are not always original, **what is important to find is to be a human being.**

Culture Manifest of 1963 (Manifes Kebudayaan)

We, the Indonesian artists and intellectuals, at this moment, announce a Culture Manifest, which declares our stand, ideals, and politics of our National Culture. For us, culture is a struggle to **the perfection of the condition of human life.** We don't prioritize one sector over another sector in culture. All sectors struggle together for a culture according to their destiny. To implement the National Culture, we try to create with the most serious honesty a struggle to defend and develop our dignity as an Indonesian nation among nations. Pancasila is our culture's philosophy.

Socialist Realism?

Statement by People's Culture Institution (LEKRA) / 1950

The People are the only creators of culture, and the construction of the new-Indonesian culture could only be made possible by the People, so on 17th in August of 1950 they founded the Lembaga Kebudayaan Rakyat (People's Culture Institution) that is shortened as Lekra / Lekra is the organization of partisan artists and artist partisans / Politics without culture could still be moving, but culture without politics is nothing but stuck / **Politics should guide all of our activities. Politics is the leader.**

Aidit's Concept in *Literature and Art* (1964).

Revolutionary writers and artists realize that literature and art should be **dedicated to the people, prioritizing laborers and farmers**. All this time they have already been waving the flag of "Art for The People" to destroy the reactionary flag "Art for Art". Literature and art should **educate and drive the working people to progress, to strengthen their unity and lighten up their spirit of struggle**, so that they could lift themselves up from the muddy cultural backwardness and could work better on their historical duty.

Contextual Literature: The Debate in the 1980s

After '65, in the New Order era, when all the Lekra members accused as “communists” were killed, jailed, or exiled to Buru Island, the organization or institution of artists could attract suspicion and paranoid thoughts. Involving politics in art was considered “wrong”, “not pure”, or at least “external to art”. This debate began to rise after Rendra staged his social protest theater and poems in the '70s.

Dominant Ideology: Aestheticism

Arief Budiman, the scholar that signed the Culture Manifest in 1963 launched the statement that Indonesian contemporary literature in the '80s had no roots, like a tree that tried to grab the sky but didn't have strong roots in the earth. In short, the dominant ideology behind Indonesian literature was what he called "aestheticism" ("estetisme"), that is considered similar to the "art for art" concept. "The right art" for him in this case was Contextual Literature: the work of art with social engagement.

The Media Factor

From the '70s to the '80s the conceptual background of Indonesian literature consisted of binary opposites:

The Social Engagement vs. The New Form,
with the media as a determining factor.

-- *Kompas* daily: poverty / realist stories.

-- *Horison* literary magazine: innovative stories.

Going into the '80s, the legitimation of *Horison* as a standard literary media that could “baptize” a writer as “Writer” began to fade. The big circulation of *Kompas* was arguably one of the reasons.

The Post-Modern Condition?

Before the 1998 Reformation, besides social engagement, there was also a trend to go political, while the idea to have roots was reflected in the rise of traditional-ethnical related works or even religiously coded works. The work considered innovative then also appeared in *Kompas*, which now had a variety of genres including short stories, poems, essays, and also popular weekly illustrations.

The media factor then created some debate that was not directly related to literature, such as the issue of center vs. marginal regions. The writers from outside Java expressed their sense of injustice about their situation.

After Reformasi 1998

Indonesian literature in the first years of Reformasi era gave a sign of the relatively open atmosphere with the popularity of women writers that wrote openly about personal-sexual matters, not only in the form of novels or short stories, but also as essays that sometimes were very “honest”. The kind of popularity (and sensation) that was created seemed to invite reaction (and condemnation) from the writers of other genres, especially the ones with a religiously-related background.

Literary Communities

This situation created some socially productive aspects, when the literary communities began to grow, each with their own media and publishing companies. Literary communities with names that were considered “dangerous” in the New Order, like “labor” (buruh), “people” (rakyat), or “democratic”, were not uncommon then. At that time some communities began to build their own websites on the internet, which created a new kind of literature that took benefit of the new media.

The Media as the Aura of the Critics

To be a critic in Indonesia is to have an “aura” that is socially needed to make an artist “legitimate” as an artist. This kind of critic doesn’t need too much critical or aesthetical theory to be known as a critic, except a personal taste and some experience in the art world to understand the atmosphere. To be a critic right now is to be related to a popular medium, so that this critic can write continuously to be known as a critic. That’s why the function of a critic is often taken over by a journalist from the paper who is not necessarily educated in art or cultural theory. They just have to be brave enough to take the job.

The Supercritic, The Promotor

In Indonesia people can read how a journalist not limits him/herself to make a report, but also reviews art exhibitions, theatre and dance performances, movies, and literature books as his/her everyday job. Of course, some journalists have the qualified capacity and others could learn something after several years and be regarded as critics. If you are known as a credible critic from a well-known media organisation, you will be needed as a way to promote a struggling artist or a certain product of art.

The Limited Academic World

The proper criticism discourse could happen in the academic world, with the instrument of theories that explain rather than judge. Research takes much time and can't compete with the speed of the media. But only part of this academic research will be published as books, so that the complete discourse will never be known. An academic discourse, even if it is critical, is not always intended to be a criticism after all. Some of these academics sometimes write critical reviews in the media, but without a continuation that is needed to build their works as a tradition of criticism.

The Politics of Literature

To make it worse, the function of criticism then is only to promote a book with the endorsement of critics on its back cover. The publishers seem to be smart enough to choose which one is the right critic for a writer, according to the ideology, genre, and particularly the community where the writer comes from and the community to which the would-be readers belong to. It also means that now every community has their own writers and their own critics in one package. But when it comes to ideology, the aestheticism still appears to be the dominant ideology of criticism, contested by all the other ideologies that struggle to make their own way in the social-political landscape. The criticism is still in the shadow of the same old dichotomy: universal humanism vs. socialist realism.