

## **‘Silenced but Not Forgotten’: A Memory of Communism in Post-Dictatorship Indonesia**

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ABSTRACT. What does it mean to be a part of a nation whose history contains a lie? In her study on Oliver Stone’s docudramas, MaritaSturken(1997b, p.65-6) explains that “rather than oppose[ing] each other, memory and history are entangled, each pulling forms from the other. The boundaries between memory and history are often easily traversed, in multiple directions.” What if there is a wide gap between a personal memory and the official history that one could not be in ‘contact’ with the other? What if the official memory does not give a space for alternative narratives of a history that come from personal, experiential memory? And, what does it take to revise history? This paper analyzes the construction of the narratives on communism in Indonesia during Suharto’s regime’s era and after its downfall in 1998. It contrasts the official history --produced through a propaganda film and a monument-- with the alternative narratives of the history, based on the individual memories of the victims packaged in a form of popular films. The paper uses memory discourse to unpack the conflictual direction of history that Indonesia witnesses in the past decades. This paper closes the discussion by giving suggestions on how to fill in the “voids,” using Huyssen’s term (2003), that have long been silenced in the official discursive texts, both written and architectural.

For over 32 years, Suharto's regime produced and fixated their official narrative of the history of the communist party movement in 1965 in Indonesia. My knowledge of the history of the party adhering to the official narrative was deconstructed years later with the pieces of the individual communist member's testimonies that became visible through popular media after the regime was overthrown in 1998. If "history and memory serve to produce narratives of the nation... [and] media plays a central role in conjuring up a sense of national belonging and community" (Lynn 2004, p.240), how do we manage the different narratives of this dark past that scatter in the individual memories and 'entangle' them with the now-ruined history to preserve and continue to be one nation? What kind of changes should the media of cultural reenactments undergo?

This paper analyzes the construction of the narratives on communism in Indonesia. It attempts to unpack the conflictual directions of history by contrasting the official history -- produced through the *G30SPKI* propaganda film and the LubangBuaya monument-- with the alternative narratives of the history, based on the individual memories of the victims packaged in a form of popular films. At the end of the paper, I come up with some suggestions on how to push the ways history to be told, re-told and revised and how media is an integral technology and apparatus in that reformation spirit.

*G30SPKI and LubangBuaya Monument: The apparatuses of official history*

*G30SPKI* (The Indonesia Communist Party's September 30 Movement) directed by Arifin C. Noer is a propaganda film produced in 1984 by the military general Suharto's regime. Until the regime was overthrown in May 1998, the film was televised on public TV station, TVRI, and later on private TV channels every September 30 to commemorate the murder of 6 generals and 3 military officials. The film performs the process of kidnapping 7 high official generals who are

accused of having a plot to overthrow the then ‘president for life’ Sukarno and to change the old regime with a new regime backed up by the United States’ capitalist ideology.

Soon after the tragedy of September 30, 1965, in 1966 Suharto gained power and ruled the country under his authoritative leadership for 32 years. As the event gave birth to his regime, no alternative reading to the history of the G30SPKI incident was allowed to be available. All was told in one fixed, official historical narrative. The film G30SPKI advances the propaganda only after visual technology of communication, i.e. television, was available and accessible in public<sup>1</sup> that was in the early 1980s. Made in the form of docudrama, the film inserts the real photographs of the exhumation of the generals’ bodies several days after they were killed and thrown to an old well in LubangBuaya. It also integrates the shaky voice of General Nasution who managed to escape from the kidnapping during the official burial ceremony that was reported through RRI, the public radio. The insertion of real archives such as this succeeds in reenacting the incident as national trauma and further authenticates the film’s form of history-making. This kind of “fantasy of history” (Sturken 1997b, p.73) especially with the strong affective effect of televisual moving images enables the film to fix the official narrative in the mind of the national viewers and at the same time dismiss the alternative reading, which barely got visible at that time.

Prior to the making of the film, the Suharto regime built a monument in 1967 in the location where the actual incident of murder occurred, LubangBuaya. The monument is comprised of life-size bronze statues of the 7 army officials as well as a large bronze Garuda, which is the symbol of the Indonesian nation. The front platform is a bronze frieze that portrays

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<sup>1</sup> In the late 1970s, as a new technology, television was only owned by upper class society. In the early 1980s, however, TV started to be available in city halls or village halls allowing lower class people to watch it in groups (Kitley 2000).

the regime's version of PKI's actions. The erection of the statues in what Nora calls "*lieux de memoire*" (1989, p.7) gives permanence to the discourses of horror, terror and the mysteriousness of PKI that the regime kept reproducing for 32 years. Its naming as the "sacred Pancasila monument" –Pancasila is the official philosophical foundation of the Indonesian state– consecrates and further claims the tragedy as a 'national' event. The stillness of the withstanding statues with the Garuda Pancasila background raises a sense of patriotism, honor and dedication. This general exceptionalism along with the affective national pride the monument (re)produces later legitimated the 'eradication' movement of alleged PKI members conducted by the military in the form of mass killing.

In the meantime, "the torture veranda" and "the old well of LubangBuaya" located in front of the monument create a sense of community and belonging. The torture veranda consists of a human-size wax diorama portraying the act of torture of PKI to the four of the seven high-ranked army officials. The human-size wax that gives the details, including the generals' and the PKI members' facial expressions, raises a feeling of intimacy and further enacts public grief and empathy. Furthermore, this frozen petrified image identifies the generals as passive recipients of torture and PKI members as an active torturer completed with weapons, such as a sickle –the symbol of PKI. The stillness freezes the binary of the generals as a victim and a hero and PKI as a perpetrator and an enemy. This staging of violence produces paranoia through which "citizens mediate their relationship to political power" (Sturken 1997b,p.77). This is where a sense of community, of sharing the same threat and enemy, is enacted.

The experience of *experiencing history* is further created by viewing the LubangBuaya well -0.75 meter in diameter and 12 meters deep, where all the dead bodies were deposited. A small plaque is placed on it and reads: "Our struggling spirit to uphold the purity of Pancasila cannot be destroyed by just burying us in this well." It anchors the tragedy within a nationalist

discourse and freezes the official narrative of the regime. Through the discourses of sacredness, memorialization and nation, the monument gives birth to a new community (Sturken 2007,p.109), with the military regime as a leader and a hero and the communist party's members as the enemy.

In the regime's time, in addition to the unified official narrative taught through the History course at school, the G30SPKI film was screened every year nationally through TV stations and grade school students had a tradition to make a pilgrimage to the LubangBuaya Monument. The *repetitive* viewing of the film that was screened every year is important to transmit social memory (Pine 2004,p.10), fixes it and at the same time affirms history. The repetition then further creates a comfort of reassurance. It is the need to unite as a nation to fight the 'common enemy' and more importantly that the threat of the enemy is 'real.' On the other hand, the pilgrimage to the site of the murder gives the people the experiential sense of the torture that the generals underwent. The reenactment of the official narratives through the film and the monument gives the viewers the experiences of "having "been there"" (Sturken 1997b,p.71). This transforms the viewers into witnesses (read: citizens). Indeed, as Sturken suggests, watching and visiting a form of cultural reenactments like this is a form of participation in the nation (*ibid.*,74). Witnessing violence and experiencing paranoia are also a way to relate to the nation in a form of daily infantilization, which is a part of citizenship (*ibid.*, 77). This is where both the film and the monument were efficacious in that they give legitimacy to the 'everyday violence' that the descendents of the allegedly communist members had continuously suffered for 32 years under Suharto's dictatorship.

*Pop culture as a space for the alternative reading to history*

After the students and activists' movement in 1998 overthrew Suharto's regime, the reformation spirit gave ways to a change in most aspects of political and social life of Indonesia's post-dictatorship's society. However, the life of the communist victims and the discourse of communism in Indonesia barely received attentions nationwide, and hence no sufficient improvement was made. Until now, History textbooks have not undergone any revisions in the way the narrative about 1965's communist movement is told, and students still do the pilgrimage to the LubangBuaya monument every year<sup>2</sup>. Among the few efforts for the struggle for the visibility of the alternative narratives are, therefore, through films.

Packaged in mostly popular culture from fictional, semi-fictional to documentary films, they attempt to give a voice to the victims on the communist party's side, those who have been silenced for 32 years and have undergone barbaric treatment from the regime. Locally produced by young Indonesians, *Mass Grave Indonesia* (documentary, 2000) by LexiRambadeta, *PasirBerbisik*(fiction, 2001) by Nan Achnas, *Gie*(semi-fiction, 2005) by RiriRiza and *LenteraMerah*(fiction, 2006) by HanungBramantyo<sup>3</sup> are among those that provoke a critical reevaluation of the long-established, one-sided, official narrative of PKI that was constructed by the regime.

*Mass Grave Indonesia* is a documentary film that records the exhumation of the victims who were accused of being a part of the communist party and were thus massacred in two locations in Central Java, which is among the locations of PKI mass graves that give records to the murder of over 3 million people. Skeletons and bones are carefully excavated from the mass grave and are then cleaned in order to undergo identifications by the experts. The presentation of

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<sup>2</sup> This is based on my interview with a History teacher at a junior high school in West Jakarta on August 10, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> The author would like to thank Intan Paramaditha for her inputs on making selections of these films.

this corporeal entity and the process of identification *re-humanize* and individualize the victims as a human being. In Suharto's regime, once they were labeled (thus identified) as related to PKI, they are 'animalized' and their life is reduced into a 'bare life' (cf. Agamben 1998) the killing of whom did not entail a violation to 'human rights.' This animalization is further depicted in the film in which the experts said that through the positions of the bones and skeletons the viewers can infer that the dead bodies were not buried 'properly.' Therefore, the attempt of the excavation team to re-bury them means *re-humanizing* them. This opening of the mass grave also suggests the opening of the long-buried secret of the barbaric treatment of the Suharto's regime to PKI members.

While the documentary film *Mass Grave Indonesia* attempts to give a counter-narrative by depicting the tangible, corporeal evidence of the cruelty and inhuman action of the regime to the PKI victims, the other three films develop counter propaganda around the discourse of innocence. Although fictional and semi-fictional in nature, the films portray the victimization of civilians who were accused of being related to PKI. *Gie* narrated the biography of a Chinese Indonesian SoeHokGie, based on his true story, who lived in the time of power transition and whose childhood best friend -a member of PKI- was massacred. *PasirBerbisik* (Whispering Sand) is about a mother and a daughter who are forced to flee to a sand-swept village after their front door was labeled with a "red cross" -PKI identification- and then burned down. *LenteraMerah* (Red Lantern) narrates a horror story about a student journalist who was accused to be a PKI member and killed after writing an article about the student magazine's participation in the Suharto's regime. Through the different angles, a minority (*Gie*), a villager (*PasirBerbisik*) and a female student (*LenteraMerah*), the three films develop a narrative of the cruelty of the regime whose conduct is mysterious, organic and omnipresent and most importantly whose victims are only innocent civilians.

Indeed, before Suharto came to power, PKI was a legal party consisting of a large number of members making it the largest communist group outside the Soviet Union and China. It is thus not uncommon to find their partisans in the society. But, as the cold war between the United States of America and the Soviet Union intensified, political ideology in Indonesia was also bifurcated into left and right. When Suharto's regime ruled the country, anything that had a relationship with PKI was eradicated even if it was only an accusation. As a result, there were many innocent civilians who were murdered just because they had a subtle connection to PKI.

One important aspect of the films that evoke relationship to the mysteriousness and the cruelty of Suharto regime is a "red cross" labeled in front of the door of those who were an alleged PKI member. This act of labeling creates a text to be read by authoritative observers (Feldman 1991, p.156) who had the legitimacy to arrest the people inside and kill them or burn down the house (like in *Pasir Berbisik*). Therefore, the act of crossing itself inherently contains violence. The insertion of this flashbulb memory (Brown and Kulik 1977, quoted by Hoskins 2004, p.119) evokes a sense of terror and trauma in the side of the viewers. For example, *Pasir Berbisik* and *Gie*'s one-second insertion of an image of red cross (a label for PKI member) on a front door (see picture 1) gives a sense of mysteriousness –of the work of Suharto regime– and hopelessness –in the side of the civilians who could 'randomly' be chosen to be the recipient of the crossing (read: violence).



Picture 1: a red cross labeled on the front door of Daya's house in *Pasirberbisik*

Despite its transmission of similar symbols and myths, the films' narrative through the spectacle of the victims and their focus on the characters' innocence not only inverts the structure of victim vs. hero that the official film and monument constructs but also subvert the 32-year authoritative power of Suharto's regime.

### *Conclusion*

"A finished monument would, in effect, finish memory itself" (Young 2000,p.194).

When being a part of the committee in the establishment of a Holocaust memorial in Germany, James Young expresses his fear that creating a monument will close the possibility to accommodate other alternative readings. Sturken resonates this point in another way by saying that remembering (read: selecting) will entail forgetting (the non-selected) (1997a,p.82). As the discussion suggests, both Young and Sturken's anxiety is proven in the Indonesian case during the regime era. When talking about ruptures and discontinuities of German Jewish history, Andreas Huyssen (2003) names the process of forgetting as the "voids of Berlin." In Indonesia's

case, the voids mean that the alternative voices to the history remain unrecognized, buried and silenced<sup>4</sup>.

Despite the freedom of speech through popular culture, I would like to suggest that a mere fight for visibility does not suffice to construct a ‘democratic’ reading to history. Indonesia needs to take further steps to recognize these alternative narratives –thus to fill the voids-- by reforming all possible apparatuses of history. Reformation should be done in all institutionalized texts -written, visual and architectural. First, there is a need to de-fetishize and de-consecrate the sacred PancasilaLubangBuaya monument. The government needs to make an effort to acknowledge -hence legalize- the different narrative, especially the massacre of the PKI victims, by establishing a counter-monument (Young 2000, p.47-8) in a form of memorial<sup>5</sup>in LubangBuaya. Second, the freedom of speech especially through films and other popular cultural forms should be widely open. This is to support this technology of memory to excavate and further explore the long-silenced voices. While official history written on textbooks is to be revised, the teaching of history also requires an integration of these popular cultural products. In her paper, Sturken nicely mentions that the essence of history is “the work of confronting the past, the labor of both confronting what cannot be known and of smoothing it over, the stuff of contradiction” (Sturken 1997b, p.79). Confrontation implies the availability and the visibility of

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<sup>4</sup> More than 10 years after the downfall of Suharto’s regime in 1998, Indonesia suffers from insomnia. His children receive smooth supports to run for presidency; people are being nostalgic about the prosperity in Suharto’s era; and, his demise in 1998 was packaged in a positive tone being called only as the “ex-father of the nation” or “the former president of Indonesia” by the media –his sins as a corrupt, authoritarian leader were thus forgotten. This national insomnia could not be experienced without the process of imagining made possible through the national media, mostly still belonging to Suharto’s relatives. (A full report on this is told through an independent documentary film, “Waktu Itu: januari 2008” (trans. “By then: January 2008”) by Ucu Agustin.)

<sup>5</sup> Sturken describes that “whereas a monument most often signifies victory, a memorial refers to the life or lives sacrificed for a particular set of values. Whatever triumph a memorial may refer to, its depiction of victory is always tempered by a foregrounding of the lives lost” (1997a, p.47-8).

the diversity of voices. Thus, different memories need to be interwoven and made visible in the (unending) effort to (re)construct history.

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