

HOW DO WE LOOK? AN INTERVIEW WITH FATIMAH TOBING RONY

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Fatimah Tobing Rony made an enduring impression on the field of film studies with the publication of *The Third Eye: Race, Cinema, and Ethnographic Spectacle* in 1996. Alongside the pioneering work of Trinh T. Minh-ha, this book was one of the first to insist that anthropology, documentary studies, and feminist film theory should be in conversation, and showed that in early cinematic representations of ethnic and racial minorities lay a shared site of inquiry for scholars in these fields. Rony's meticulously researched chapters on Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* as a genre of documentary "taxidermy" and on the aesthetic of monstrosity in Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack's *King Kong* have attained canonical status in syllabi of introductory film courses. Equally, the book's comparative analyses of popular and scientific cinematic genres alongside other early twentieth-century practices of ethnographic display, including world's fairs and natural history museums, demonstrated a prescient transmedial methodology that explains its continuing impact.

One of the most striking vignettes in *The Third Eye* is Rony's reading of the "bride of Kong," a mute, naked, docile character whose only function is to be sacrificed, literally (to Kong) and formally (she will soon be substituted within the film's narrative economy by the glamorous, white Ann Darrow). Although Skull Island is purported to be in Indonesia, the bride of Kong, like the other islanders, is played by an African American actor—an oversight that indicates her status not as a character but as a pure signifier of the "real." She exists to evidence the backwardness of her race of purported cannibals, losers in an epochal game of modernity of which cinema is both harbinger and protagonist.

Rony and I met in September 2013 to have a conversation about independent filmmaking by and about women

and minorities in Indonesia—a topic that would seem to indicate that the rules of this game, its points of access, and its players have been decisively complicated in our post-modern, globalized moment. I asked for Rony's reflections as a feminist film scholar on a filmmaking experience that forms a thematic bridge between *The Third Eye* and her current book project, *How Do We Look?*, which uses representations of Indonesian women as well as the films of women directors as a point of departure for new theories of looking. A few years ago, Rony participated as a filmmaker in *Perempuan Punya Cerita* (Chants of Lotus, 2007), a controversial omnibus film produced by Nia Dinata, an Indonesian producer-director who has garnered an unusual combination of commercial success and critical acclaim for her independent films exploring religiously and culturally sensitive topics from homosexuality to polygamy. *Chants of Lotus* brought together four filmmakers and two scriptwriters—all women—to collaboratively produce a film with four segments that would address different social obstacles and coercions facing women in contemporary Indonesia, from reproductive health and abortion rights to the trafficking of women, underage sex, and the stigma surrounding HIV. This was also Rony's first departure from producing short films (such as her 1994 video *On Cannibalism*) to collaborate on a feature film oriented toward a primarily nonacademic audience.

In the following interview Rony and I attempt to develop a framework for thinking about alternative cinematic horizons that is attentive to the relation between social and technical infrastructures, global and local frictions, and aesthetic and cultural restraint. The bride of Kong is a spectral presence throughout our conversation, in which the carnal appetites of contemporary Indonesian cinema audiences for images of their own "primitives"—adolescent girls, children, disabled individuals, and sexual and ethnic minorities—remains a constant theme. The discussion offers an opportunity to take stock of Rony's work, explore the films and writings she has done in the decade

Film Quarterly, Vol. 67, No. 2, pps 62–68, ISSN 0015-1386, electronic ISSN 1533-8630.
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Fatimah Tobing Rony, on location in Indonesia during the filming of “Chant from an Island,” one of four segments in Nia Dinata’s *Chants of Lotus* (2007).

and a half since *The Third Eye*, and consider the evolving questions at stake in representation from an “other” position. The question at which we arrive toward the end of our conversation is also the title of this piece, and of Rony’s work in progress. In a context in which visibility, access, and emancipation (the demands often associated with women’s cinema) are frequently accompanied by the deleterious effects of overexposure and violation: *How do we look?*

Collaborative Model

Rangan: How did you come to be involved in Nia Dinata’s omnibus film *Perempuan Punya Cerita* (*Chants of Lotus*)? Can you describe the process of collaborating with the other filmmakers—how was it inflected by the cultural and creative context of filming in Indonesia?

Rony: I met Nia at the Los Angeles Asian Pacific Film Festival in 2004. I was showing a short film, *Treasure*, and

Nia was showing her award-winning film *Arisan!*, a gay comedy about young urban professionals in Jakarta experiencing a crisis of sexual identity. She offered to help me raise money for another film I wanted to shoot in Indonesia (I have family there and lived there on and off for ten years after college and while I was a Fulbright fellow, so I feel like what Trinh T. Minh-ha may call the “unassimilated other”), and ended up asking me to direct the segment titled “Chant from an Island.” But I never felt like an outsider during the process; in fact the different backgrounds of the four directors and the two scriptwriters are reflective of the hybridity of Indonesian identity, and the collaborative process called into question who is an author.

The process involved the four directors getting together to brainstorm and modify the scripts of the four stories that were already written and loosely connected by the theme of issues pertinent to women in Indonesia. For instance, since it didn’t make sense that Lakshmi (the Chinese Indonesian woman who has AIDS) would be shunned by her own family, we changed her character to suggest she is an orphan from another part of the country. We each chose one of the stories to film based on our individual sensibilities. It made sense that Upi, who’s sort of the rock and roll film director, would do the movie about teenage sex set in Yogyakarta. Lasja made the film about Lakshmi, based in Jakarta, since she was eight months’ pregnant and would be in the vicinity of hospitals if she went into labor (there’s a high rate of maternal death in Indonesia because there aren’t adequate medical facilities in smaller cities and villages). Nia’s mother is from West Java, the setting for her story about the maid who works in a bar and whose daughter is kidnapped and sold as a child bride, and I was intrigued by the one about the midwife dying of breast cancer on an island.

Fieldwork

Rangan: When I watched *Perempuan Kisah Dalam Guntigan* (*Women Behind the Censor*, 2008), the documentary about the making of *Chants*, I realized that many of the more shocking pieces of dialogue in the film are excerpted directly from interviews that you and the other filmmakers conducted with various focus groups. Much of the impact of the film comes from the uneasy relation between these charged moments of documentary realism and the otherwise melodramatic style of the film. Can you talk about the research that went into this film, and its impact on your formal choices?

Rony: We did extensive field research with various focus groups that we then negotiated against the existing scripts written by Vivian Idris and Melissa Karim. For instance, in “Chant from a Tourist Town,” both the dialogue and scenario of the group sex scene and its aftermath are lifted directly from conversations with high school students: the extent to which Internet porn influences their notions about what sex is; the way the boys have sex with a girl at one of their homes while the mother is out studying the Koran; the “lottery” of drawing names from an empty soda can to decide who will marry her; the trick of framing one of the boys by ensuring that his is the only name on all the pieces of paper. Nia, Melissa, one of the scriptwriters, and the Assistant Director Cinzia are all young women who dress like the students, and because Nia is a bit of a Sofia Coppola-type figure, the students felt comfortable talking about sex with them, and sharing these shocking details. We heard a lot of crazy stuff during this fieldwork that found its way into our films. We would go to restaurants and just ask people, “Is it possible to get a child?” and would be told, “Yeah, I can get you a girl,” or “I can get you a baby.” You could sell a baby to be adopted or sell girls into prostitution.

These stories shaped the ways in which we dealt with the explicit and implicit levels of betrayal between women in our films. The cover-up rituals surrounding rape prompted us to reconsider the aftermath of the rape of Wulan, the autistic girl on whom the midwife Sumantri performs an unauthorized abortion in my film, “Chant from an Island.” Nia pointed out that in Indonesia, no one is raped and left alone; the woman is either forced to marry the man or the man would pay off the family to hush it up. So we changed the story so that the final betrayal comes in the form of Sumantri’s husband encouraging her to allow Wulan’s grandmother to take the money from the rapist. The setting for my film was inspired by a conversation with a group of midwives, one of whom told us about the sole midwife working on an island with no medical facilities—mothers were giving birth and sometimes their infants could potentially die if she happened to be gone for the day to Jakarta. We visited the island several times and incorporated it as the film’s setting and cast several of the locals as characters. The film takes place in the midwife’s actual home. The medical instruments you see are actually her instruments. The male character who buys their house when they leave the island is her husband. The woman who plays Wulan’s grandmother was also a local. This was in part a necessity because we could not afford a full cast of professional actors, but it was also a way of inhabiting the setting.



A scene from “Chant from a Village,” the segment of *Chants of Lotus* directed by Nia Dinata, who conceived the omnibus film. Photo courtesy of Dianti Andajani

Filming in Indonesia

Rangan: What was unusual and surprising to you about the practical realities of independent film production in Indonesia? Since the directors of the individual films were all women, can you talk about the power dynamic between yourselves and the crew?

Rony: We were on a tight deadline for the Jakarta Film Festival, but in general they shoot very fast in Indonesia. The budget for the entire film was very low—around \$200,000. We met in May, shot in July, and I had two weeks to picture-lock my segment after which the film was sent to Chennai, India, for the sound mix. Even though we shot on digital cameras (the film was eventually transferred to 35mm), it was really helpful to have been trained on film. Because the Indonesian film industry does not have the lavish budgets of Hollywood, we have to shoot so fast, with sync-sound. You have to close your eyes and envision the film in your mind before you go out to shoot. So you over-plan, storyboard, take photographs; you cannot bank on improvising. I shot as if I was shooting on film. The conditions were strenuous: the crew of eighty took a boat to the island that was the setting for my segment. The electricity comes on only at night on this island, so we had to have a generator during the day, which added to the heat of the sun. The conditions of filming outdoors, with fifty-three men and women dying in the sun, and some of the young male crew members getting sunstroke, felt a bit like Herzog’s *Fitzcarraldo* (1982). [But] you cannot ethically afford to be unprepared—it’s not fair to the crew or the actors. The Indonesian film industry is pretty advanced, and Nia has a well-run studio with drivers, a cook for the crew, and staff for business, so when we shoot, it’s purely about directing, which was amazing.



Teenage schoolgirls in “Chant from a Tourist Town” directed by Upi Avianto. Photo courtesy of Dianti Andajani

Other parts of it felt like any kind of independent filmmaking, I imagine: we slept on the floors of people’s houses since there are no hotels on the island.

One thing I found interesting was how comfortable the crew was with women directors—they said they were totally used to it and it was not a problem. In ’98 when the Indonesian economy crashed, it actually opened up the film industry to women like Nia Dinata, Shanti Harmayn, and Mira Lesmana, who became film producers and began making films exploring taboo social topics, often from women’s perspectives. I found this very interesting because in the US, maybe three percent of Hollywood directors are women. The structural misogyny is so blatant. Film schools graduate fifty percent or more women and very few of them get jobs as directors—more women end up working as editors or producers. This is one of the great ironies of technological “progress”: the advances in technology were supposed to free us, but that’s not necessarily true. In fact, as of the past ten years, if you graduate from film school, chances are you are expected to shoot, edit, and be a producer all at once; we call them “preditors.”

Rangan: I imagine the respect you commanded there may also have had to do with the way class and caste hierarchies work in much of Asia, where the producers and directors often come from class privilege. But the unexpected paradoxes you note about cinema in non-Western contexts and the so-called progressive West are fascinating.

Rony: I see what you’re saying about class and respect. Another link to the US is that the film is actually related in a strange way to [President] Barack Obama. Obama’s mother was an anthropologist in Indonesia who lobbied the Ford Foundation for funds for Indonesian women to start companies and initiatives. So that’s how the Ford

Foundation came to fund Dinata’s Kalyana Shira Foundation, through which she has produced films that subvert a number of popular American conceptions about Islam and sexuality. For instance, Nia’s film *Berbagi Suami* (Sharing Husbands, 2006) deals with polygamy not through the problems of men dealing with multiple women (as in the US HBO TV show *Big Love*, 2006–2011), but from the point of view of three different women in Indonesia in different economic and cultural circumstances who are all dealing with the fact that their husbands are polygamous.

Funding Model

Rangan: One of the topics *Chants of Lotus* deals with (along with teenage sex, child trafficking, and the stigma surrounding AIDS) is abortion rights in cases where consent is an issue. It seems remarkable that the president of the United States would be affiliated in any way with funding a film that assumes a strong stance on a topic that is so politically sensitive in the US.

Rony: It’s quite possible that they don’t quite know how the film is going to turn out or what the discourse around it will be. It’s also possible that they know that the reach of this kind of film is very limited, so they are not worried that the content is potentially subversive. The audience for non-mainstream cinema, even in the US, nowadays, is so limited. The hunger that audiences had in the 60s and 70s for content that was different simply doesn’t exist anymore. My students are perplexed even when I show an Antonioni film. Audiences have been trained to want to view content that is formally and topically more conservative.

Building an Audience

Rangan: I imagine much of the work surrounding this film then had to do with building an audience in Indonesia that does not yet exist. What were some of the issues you dealt with in terms of exhibiting the film and making it palatable to your ideal audience?

Rony: Part of what we were dealing with—and indeed this is thematized in the films—is the reluctance to have an open dialogue about sex. Because parents are in denial about the desire of their children to know about sex, their points of access and knowledge are often through the Internet, where sex is often equivalent with the violent derogation of women’s bodies. We also felt that it was not enough to simply “represent” stories relevant to the lives of

women in Indonesia. On one hand, it is comforting when you are experiencing sorrow to see people who are experiencing a similar sorrow. But often that kind of identification doesn't go anywhere, and that's why I think it's important to have dialogue.

The film only got theatrical release in the major cities for a week or two, so we had to find other venues for that discussion. In addition to distributing the film, Nia would take the film on "road shows" to communities and schools all over the country to have discussions about the issues—this works well in Indonesia because people in general tend to be warm and welcoming. The road shows don't actually make money, but because the funding was from a nonprofit organization, their cost is built into the budget for the film, which is quite brilliant. Many independent filmmakers now do this. We also tried to build a crossover audience by casting a number of famous actresses and personalities in the lead roles of the film. Rieke Dyah Pitaloka, who plays Sumantri, the midwife, in my film is a very famous comedienne, sort of like the Tina Fey of Indonesia. Lakshmi, the woman with AIDS, is played by Susan Bachtiar, a news presenter. And Shanty [Anissa Nurul Shanty Kusuma Wardhani Heryadi], who plays Esi, the nightclub maid whose daughter is kidnapped and sold as a child bride, is a hugely popular pop singer with a status in Indonesia similar to someone like Gwen Stefani. The film about teenage sex has a cast of largely nonprofessional or as-yet-unknown teenage actors—it was hard to find teens who were willing to be depicted having sex on camera. So in this way we tried to bring in different demographics as an audience for the film by casting both everyday people and glamorous women in unglamorous roles.

Censorship

Rangan: Another way to think about the funding structures and limited exhibition avenues available for feminist independent cinema of this kind might be as a form of passive censorship. How was it paralleled by the other, more active forms of censorship that this production has encountered?

I recall a rather striking interview in *Women Behind the Censor* with a woman on the Indonesian Film Censorship board who defends the censorship of *Chants* as pornographic by explaining, "Having sex is pornography" (I'm paraphrasing).

Her stance was that topics of a sexual nature should only be explored in sex-education films for

intended for pedagogical purposes, not in fiction films oriented toward the general public. What is being suggested here about genre and propriety?

Rony: The censor board cut ninety meters of the film. We had been to some extent prepared for this—although Nia did not censor us as directors, she was vigilant at the level of the script. But we did not expect the censor board to be so vicious. The scenes they cut left the individual films feeling quite incoherent. The scene of the teenage girl in hijab (from "Chant from a Tourist Town") who asks her friend what it feels like to have group sex was cut. They cut the group sex scene itself to turn it into a sex scene with one person. In Lasja's film about the woman who contracts HIV from her husband, they cut the scene where the husband is shown having sex with a woman in the toilet of a nightclub and dies of an overdose, so that the film is stripped of its context. In my film, they wanted to cut a highly stylized scene where the midwife Sumantri is bathing Wulan, who is shocked and disoriented after being raped by a gang of boys on the pretext that it could be construed as sexually arousing because you can see that she is naked, since we see a lot of her back.

There are double standards when it comes to other genres: that same year, *Quickie Express* (directed by Dimas Djayadinigrat, and produced by Nia Dinata, 2007), a sex comedy about male gigolos, came out and that wasn't censored at all, despite being full of double entendres. So comedy about men doesn't get censored, but a drama by four women about women's sexuality—that can't be allowed. Sex comedies are therefore very marketable in Indonesia, as are horror films, which often feature Japanese porn stars. Nia has figured out that you need to produce sex comedies that make money like *Quickie Express* in order to be able to make films like *Chants*, which don't make any money.

Melodrama

Rangan: It would seem that the generic conventions of Indonesian cinema, such as the sex comedy's use of double entendre and euphemism, offer an aesthetic vehicle for socially and religiously mandated forms of restraint. An argument of this type has been made regarding melodrama as a "women's genre." Melodrama, it is argued, "hystericizes" what cannot socially be expressed, which is why the *mise-en-scène* and music takes on a heightened drama. But from another perspective, one can also see how these conventional tropes play a regulatory role—where the emotional lures of melodrama turn

cinema into a regulated domain of catharsis that ultimately resigns women to their social circumstances. What are your thoughts about this relation to the high melodrama of *Chants of Lotus*, especially since it is a self-described film “for, by, and about women”?

Rony: Yes, I did actually think about this. I was recently on a panel with the film scholar Linda Williams, who argues that US television shows like the AMC network’s *Breaking Bad* (2008–2013) or *Mad Men* (2007–) could be regarded as melodramas—that narrative itself is melodrama and that melodrama has been debased or demeaned as a women’s narrative. The standard understanding of melodrama is that it is oriented toward drawing tears from the audience (the “tear-jerker”), and since melodramas have traditionally been oriented toward women audiences, it is regarded as a “women’s genre.” But melodrama is not just about emotion, but about intellect yoked to emotion—a form of emotional reasoning, if you will. So I have always been sympathetic to melodrama, even in my other short films. I try to use its narrative function to articulate the unspeakable transactions of human relationships, especially relationships between women.

In its original iteration, the script for “Chant from an Island” was even more melodramatic: it opened with Wulan having been raped by the local boys, and ended with the midwife Sumantri dying of cancer in a hospital, surrounded by everyone. The men are really awful and her husband is not the most sympathetic of characters. Childless married couples often have a unique union; they are loving but not in the normative way. So I suggested to Vivian that she revise the script so that the husband actually adores the wife, but forces her to see the reality of their situation and leave the island to seek treatment in Jakarta (she is in a legal bind because of having performed an illegal abortion on Wulan after her rape). There were other moments where I tried to diffuse the soap-operatic tendencies of the script: for instance, the scene where Sumantri is bathing Wulan (the one the censors wanted to cut) is highly stylized so as not to reify the kind of excited gaze that has been trained to find the spectacle of violation pleasurable—it’s really about the different ways that women look at each other versus the way men are taught to look at their bodies. For some of the other filmmakers, melodrama offered a means for the strategic exaggeration of violence: for instance Upi really wanted the abortion conducted on the teenage girl to shock young men who think abortions are totally routine and normal, so she made sure to show blood gushing out.



Teenage schoolboys viewing internet porn in “Chant from a Tourist Town” directed by Upi Avianto.

On Looking

Rangan: The theme of aesthetic restraint and the camera’s look at the bodies of women and ethnic others also runs through your book *The Third Eye* and your other essays. You have noted, for instance, how the Hopi filmmaker Victor Masayesva Jr. [*Imagining Indians* (1993); *Two Faces of One Room* (1992)] uses formal techniques designed specifically to reconcile the Euro-American voyeurism of the cinematic gaze with indigenous cultural mores, such as painting over the personal photographs shown in his films to add opacity and abstraction, or choosing extreme long shots in lieu of close-ups of ethnic bodies. You are similarly attuned in your filmmaking and writing to the challenge of bringing the female body into a field of visibility in a different way that avoids “overexposure.” Can you talk about your search for an idiom—visual and theoretical—to express the ways in which women look at each other?

Rony: Ever since seeing the films of Trinh T. Minh-ha and Charles Burnett in New York in the 1980s, I’ve been interested in the question of how to make ethnographic work that does not violate the privacy and mystery of the subject by turning her into a monstrous other. I’m always asking how you can keep the mystery, so you don’t feel like you totally know her. The history of representing women often trades on this mystery in the name of challenging bourgeois conventions. You can think for instance of nineteenth-century realist paintings which are all about the study of the female nude. Painters like Degas and Manet would often depict women of the “lower” classes—prostitutes, ballet dancers, laundresses—in demeaning naked poses. In my current book project, I position the

art-historical tradition of the nude as a predecessor of the contemporary pornographic trope of the violated, exposed female body. This is sort of what Upi shows us in her film about teenage sex—the boys view women pornographically, as exposed bodies that make no demand on the viewer, and offer themselves to be debased. I'm fascinated by the pleasure we take in violated bodies—I call it “fascinating cannibalism.” I'm interested in how we can make different types of films by simply thinking about how a woman behaves, thinks, and feels.

In Indonesia, you're never supposed to say “I” because it's considered egotistical. Instead we have two forms of “we”: *kita*, which includes the second person (“you and I”), and *kami*, when the second person isn't included. It's very indicative of a cultural orientation in which one is never a protagonist regarding the world; instead one's subjectivity is wrapped up in the way one is looked at by others. How does this “we” change the way we look, as filmmakers and as theorists, at the history of Western representations of ethnic women? I look at different representations of Indonesian women (including Gauguin's muse, the 13-year-old Annah la Javanaise, who is akin to both the white prostitute

and the black maid of Manet's famous *Olympia* painting), as well as particular films by women directors like Sally Potter, Agnes Varda, and Marzieh Meshkini. How do they make films about women that we can use in theorizing visual representations?

These are questions and thematics that also feed back into my filmmaking. My next film project, *She Shines a Light*, is about the encounter between a recently rich Indonesian businessman and an Indonesian hotel maid—an immigrant who has been living in the States for a while—whom he meets during a trip to LA. I am interested in the conflicts that exist between them in the context of a new dynamic of globalization. My challenge is to thoughtfully render the encounter from the man's point of view, as it is kaleidoscoped by the layered stereotype of the prostitute-maid-muse, going back to Gauguin's Annah la Javanaise. As with the book, here too the guiding question for me is, how can we change representation? We cannot write or make film, or create art or music, if we do not begin to understand the visual and textual vocabulary of justification that continues to allow for women of color to reside in what are essentially phantom realms of nonrecognition.