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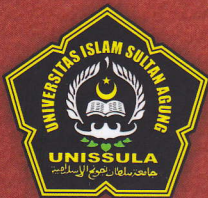
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THE ROLE OF FILM AS THE PRODUCT OF POPULAR CULTURE IN DEFINING AMERICAN CULTURAL IDENTITY: AN ARGUMENTATIVE POINT OF VIEW FROM INDONESIA'S PERSPECTIVE¹

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*It is for want of self-culture that the superstition of Traveling, whose
idols are Italy, England, Egypt, retains its fascination for all educated*

Americans

(Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Self-Reliance*)

Abstract

Since the first settlement, America has shaped its existence to become the land of freedom, of hope, and of prosperity. It has attracted millions of people to flee from any oppressions and search for a more independence self existence. Many generations have built this huge nation since the arrival of *Mayflower*. History recorded how the nation survived from the war of independence, slavery and the civil war, the rise of industrialism, the great depression, and both world wars. Still the *Stars Spangled Banner* echoes through the hall when some immigrants are naturalized and welcomed to be citizens of the United States. So great its attraction that people all over the world dream of having an opportunity to experience and, even further, to live a life in the United States of America. The country provided job opportunities not only for the skilled but also unskilled labors, especially in 1890s when America needed a lot of cheap labors to develop its industry. Consequently, new settlements were opened and the process of assimilation led this country to find its own characteristics, the unique characteristics that can accommodate all the different ethnic groups, national origins and cultural traditions.

The discussion of the paper is aimed at finding the shaping of American cultural identity by looking at its intellectual movement, sociological

perspectives and historical background through the product of mass culture, film. The use of an interdisciplinary approach, which is the characteristic of American Studies, is applied in order to have a more comprehensive discussion. Here, film is seen as the media to disseminate and introduce culture. Aside from its industrial interest, film has proven to be the effective media of learning other culture. Therefore, film industry is also one of the important aspects in looking at American identity. As the relationship between Indonesia and America has been developed well, film can be "the agent" of popular culture that influences the popular culture in Indonesia as well.

Keywords: *history, industry, mass product, film, ethnics, identity, popular culture*

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INTRODUCTION

The excerpt above is taken from *Self Reliance* by Ralph Waldo Emerson, a prominent figure in the first half of the 19th century. It criticizes the trend at that era that American people tended to follow other culture instead of having their own culture. It also reminds us of what Crèvecoeur ever asked earlier in his *Letters from an American Farmer*, "What then is the American, this new man? He is either a European, or the descendant of a European, hence that strange mixture of blood, which you will find in no other country" (Crèvecoeur, par3, p.27). From these two points of view, the question of what the real American identity is has long been debated as an effort to determine the characteristics of this "new nation". Both Crèvecoeur and Ralph Waldo Emerson represent two different eras but they raise the same question.

Letters from an American Farmer was written in 1782 and *Self-Reliance* was first published in a collection of *Essays: First Series* in 1841.

Yet, there is no exact definition and this becomes the nation's unique characteristic that distinguishes America from other nations in the world. The metaphor of assimilation process such as *Melting Pot*, *Salad Bowl* and *Pizza*, at least, helps us to imagine this most heterogeneous society. In the *Melting Pot* the Americans are considered to have one ethnic identity, especially to those who live in the early settlements. The concept is surely inappropriate to illustrate the uniqueness of America. Then, the *Salad Bowl* defines that Americans still maintain their own ethnic identities and, therefore, there is no one single flavor. Meanwhile, *Pizza* represents American's favorite food and its mixed ingredients offer particular taste and flavor that are fused together into something larger (Stevenson 1996: 14)

Referring to Crèvecoeur and Emerson's writings, the concept of *Melting Pot* seems to be appropriate to define the American culture since the first settlers are of European ancestors who tried to redesign its new colony. At this point, a new nation should have its own characteristics instead of copying those of their mother country. Then, as industry advanced, the need of a better transportation became the major concern of America in the 19th century. Labors were the answer at that time. They came from many different countries and were willing to be paid under minimum wage. As the gate was opened, more and more immigrants entered the United States of America. The situation has led to an assimilation process. Here, the concept of *Salad Bowl* is more

appropriate since those immigrants brought with them the roots of their culture. They maintain their culture but still have to communicate with others by using the language everyone knows. While the first two concepts discussed above are focusing on the people and their ethnic identities, the *Pizza* puts country as the important aspect that binds all those factors. Each ethnic identity can still maintain its peculiarities but they are united by America as the nation.

The question then, is there a genuine American identity when many ethnics, race and culture assimilate to one another? This becomes an interesting point to discuss since American industries expand their businesses to many countries in the world and their products carry the icon of America. One of the products that gives a tremendous impact on how people outside of America learn, identify and even imitate American culture is film or movie. This can be a boomerang if the interpretation is far away different from the fact. Film or movie is made not only to convey messages but also to gain material profit. The discussion will be focused on two movies which the writer took randomly, *I am not Rappaport* and *The Terminal*. The writing is an argumentative paper and it mainly expresses the writer's point of view.

I am not Rappaport is a movie about the friendship of two old men who like to reminisce past loves, talk about unions and bosses, old age, and idealism. They come from different social backgrounds but share the same freedom of speech and act. It's a story about living in America with all the social problems and conflicts of identity. On the other hand, *The Terminal* is a movie about a visitor coming to the

United States of America and this visitor got stuck at the airport because of a document problem regarding the coup in his country. He has to stay in the airport and discover how the Americans live their lives. He managed to survive even though he encountered language problem. Here, communication becomes one of the major themes of the movie. Both movies apparently represent the problem of identity in America, and therefore, the discussion over *I am not Rappaport* and *The Terminal* provides another perspective in looking at American cultural identity.

THEORITICAL APPROACH

Since this paper is a product of the American Study's discipline, it will follow the theory and approaches proposed by American Studies scholars. Robert Meredith explains that the concept of culture around which American Studies revolves, cut across and includes the content of other disciplines (1968:74). Here, American Studies applies interdisciplinary approaches in order to come into a comprehensive discussion. Therefore, the discussion should also embrace *past, present and future* (McDowell, 1948:4). The sequence of *past, present and future* support the idea of an interdisciplinary approach since it brings a continuous and integrated discussion. It helps revealing the evidences of the artifacts of *past, present and future*.

Furthermore, it is also important to apply the cultural studies theory in discussing a movie. Steward explains that the study of culture can be seen through indirect evidence, such as novels, motion pictures, and the like (1972:49). Here, movie is considered as the product of

culture since it carries the portrait of certain phenomena in society. Even though the story can be fictitious but it is based on the process of contemplation and research of the writer, and thus it involves cultural values. This is also in line with Barker idea that culture is concerned with questions of shared social meanings or the various ways we make sense of the world (2000:8).

FILM AS THE PRODUCT OF POPULAR CULTURE

Film is one of the cultural artifacts, which deals with social phenomena in our daily lives. The story offered varies in different genres but the functions are basically the same, both entertaining and educating. Those who like seeing movies have different ways in appreciating the story. It can be understood since "film" and "cinema" has different definition concerning the aspect of the art.

French theorists are fond of making the differentiation between "film" and "cinema". The "filmic" is that aspect of the art that concerns its relationship with the world around it; the "cinematic" deals with the esthetics and internal structure of the art.

In English, we have a third word for "film" and "cinema" – "movies" which provides a convenient label for the third facet of activity: its function as an economic commodity. These three aspects are closely interrelated, of course: one person's "movies" is another's "film". But in general we use these three names for the art in a way that closely parallels this differentiation: "movies," like popcorn, are to be

consumed; "cinema" (at least in American parlance) is high art, redolent of esthetics; "film" is the most general term we use with the fewest connotations (Monaco 2009: 252)

Based on the quotation above, the discussion on film/cinema/movie may refer to the aspect of art and to the fact that film/cinema/movie is the product of mass culture involving industries. Like the works of literature, a film also involves characters, theme, setting, and conflict. It also conveys the phenomena in our surroundings. To the audiences, a film can give great impact on the way they value and judge the social changing and perspectives.

In the film industries, the making of a movie not only involves artists and crews but also big industries behind the screen that finance the production of a movie.

In the new century the corporate entities that own the studios believe in "synergy." They are horizontally (rather than vertically) integrated organizations. In addition to studios, they also own paperback book publishing companies, record companies, television production companies, theme parks, sports franchises, chains of video stores, stadiums, and the occasional wild animal preserve. (They have sold the toy companies). A property, once acquired, can now be exploited in five or more media: films, books, records, broadcast television, and DVD (Monaco 2009: 282)

“Synergy” is the word that defines the long process of creating movies. Regardless the quality of certain movies, the creation process requires the synergy of many factors. Thus, the policy of those big industries may also affect the theme of a movie produced. Industries have spent money in order to gain more profit. They decide what kind of movies should be produced. Here, film is the agent of popular culture that also creates consumerism among the viewers. It happens since the backbone of film industries involves various kinds of products that need to be bought and consumed by society.

Hence, the politics of film industries has brought movie viewers to digest a theme of a movie into a deeper analysis. The appearance of certain products in a story may reflect the financial support of a movie. It can also be understood as the drive to select the best product to be consumed. If the actresses or actors in the movie use the products, it will also be good for the viewers to consume the products advertised. David Chaney explains that the idea of consumerism depends on the possibility of mass marketing and advertisement,

Kekuatan gagasan mengenai budaya konsumen tergantung pada kemungkinan pemasaran massa seiring dengan periklanan massa (1996:57).

Film is therefore not only a media to convey social phenomena but also a powerful “advertisement” to influence the viewers’ mind. From this point of view, it is not about the aspect of art with the world around (“*filmic*”) or the esthetics and internal structure of the art (“*cinematic*”), but the idea that movie also has the function as an economic commodity.

On the other word, film is the work of art with all its esthetics elements to give inspiration but at the same time it is the product of popular culture.

AMERICAN CULTURAL IDENTITY AS SEEN IN *I AM NOT RAPPAPORT*

This may not be a popular film for some people, but this movie is based on a play written by Herb Gardner. Herb Gardner wrote both the stage play and the screen play for the movie version and won the 1986 Tony award for Best Play. The movie is about the relationship between two old men, Nat Moyer (Walter Matthau) and Midge Carter (Ossie Davis). Nat Moyer is a white man who always talks about the time when people gathered in a Union hall and decided to have a strike in 1910. He was only a five years old boy at that time. Yet, the memory still remains and inspires him to create stories as if he were there joining the strike back in 1910. While Midge Carter is a black man who works at New York City’s central park as an apartment house superintendent. Both are about the same age, around eighty. They like sitting on the bench and talking about society’s problems concerning treatment toward the aging, children, love and romance, and also issues on labor.

I am not Rappaport is chosen since this movie involves philosophical discussion, history and also relationship between the old and the young generation in America. Viewers must understand the social and historical background in order to reveal the message of this movie. The story begins with a flashback in the year of 1909 when Nat

Moyer was just a five years old kid. His parents took him in a meeting at the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union (I.L.G.W.U.) where general strike was officially announced. Samuel Gomper also attended the meeting. He was the president of the American Federation of Labor (1886-1924). Historically, this scene is inspired by the situation in 1910 when 20,000 workers in the industry walked off their jobs,

In the summer of 1910 the I.L.G.W.U. went on a carefully planned strike for abolition of the "inside" system which created sweatshop conditions, establishment of a forty-eight-hour week, and union recognition in the cloak makers' industry (Rayback 1966:254)

From the quotation above, it can be seen the historical background of the movie that makes *I am not Rappaport* a serious movie. It needs a wide range of knowledge in order to reveal the messages, specifically from the perspective of an Indonesian viewer.

This event remains in the memory of young Nat Moyer. He always talks about the general strike to people he meets. Here, the discussion over philosophical issues such as capitalism and socialism is clearly shown in the dialogue between Nat and Midge. Midge even called Nat as a communist. The musical background of this movie is *The Internationale*,

The Internationale is the international song of both Marxist and non-Marxist socialist parties. It was written in French by Eugene Pottier, a woodworker from Lille, after the fall of the Paris Commune of 1871, and set to music by P. Degeyter. The "Internationale" referred to is the International Working Men's Association, the so-called First

Internationale (1864/76), part of which had supported the Commune. It has been used across the world as a song of resistance to oppression ("The Internationale", p.1, par 1)

From an Indonesian viewer perspective, America can be seen as the land of dreams and hopes for different kinds of people. When an Indonesian viewer hears *The Internationale*, he/she might think that America values differences in any matters. In Indonesia, it will be a big problem talking about socialism and communism, especially before 1998. The debate between Nat and Midge shows how an argument is highly valued in America that people may have different perspective regardless his/her political and philosophical background.

It is also a movie which reveals the relationship between parents and children, old generation and young generation. Nat's daughter insisted him not to wander around in the park because it is not safe. She even proposed three options for him, staying with her and having his own room, staying in a fancy senior resident, or staying in the senior center and being visited by her or other members of the family every afternoon. All options are rejected by Nat. In Indonesia, especially in small towns and villages, people live in the extended family. Parents are living with the children's family. Some younger generation may not follow this tradition, but usually one of the children stays and takes care of the parents. The movie of course gives a different perspective in which leaving the parents alone is not a big matter in America. Parents have the right to live alone and so do the children.

Another aspect of *I am not Rappaport* is the social interaction among American people in the New York City's park. A park is a public space for people from different social backgrounds. The movie shows social interactions among some of the multi-ethnics in American life; the black, white, Latino, and Indian. The New York City's park in *I am not Rappaport* represents the life of American people where children, office workers, street artists, hobos, old people like Nat and Midge, criminals, drug dealers and many others mix together. The description of a daily life in the park may give a false perception for an Indonesian viewer. The movie would like to show the real life in America, on the other hand, viewer thinks that lack of safety and ignorance are the American image they keep in mind.

AMERICAN CULTURAL IDENTITY AS SEEN IN *THE TERMINAL*

The Terminal is directed by a famous movie director, Steven Spielberg. The theme is simple but the exploration of each element of this movie has raised the viewers' emotion to enjoy the search for a huge dream, America herself.

The Terminal is the story of Viktor Navorski (Tom Hanks), a traveler who had to stay at John F. Kennedy International Airport after a coup happened in his homeland, Republic of Krakozhia, which is actually a fictional country. He is told that America is closed and is forced to wait in the international terminal. He is in a situation of not having a nationality. It is hard to imagine in a situation like what

happens to Viktor. He does not speak English well and he does not have dollar to support his living in the international terminal. He has to learn from the surroundings and find the way to survive. From the perspective of an Indonesian viewer, *The Terminal* also offers a different perspective to see America. The airport and the many people walking there illustrate ethnic diversities in America. There are shops inside the airport and the shopkeepers mostly of non-white Americans. This is an interesting point in which non-white Americans and some illegal immigrants take the low level job. This may result in an assumption that having a job is quite easy in America as long as we do not make any troubles. It is what America offers to the world, the American Dream.

Furthermore, language barrier is another aspect revealed in this movie. One must be able to speak English in order to survive in America. It shows how English is used in the daily conversation and formal encounter. Viktor Navorski did not understand his situation because he does not speak English well. Hence, he was trapped in a very rare situation that eventually forced him to learn English. Once he learns the language, he knows what to do. It can be assumed that living in America is so promising once we understand the rule of the games.

Despite the romance between Viktor Navorski (Tom Hanks) and Amelia Warren (Chaterine Zeta Jones), *The Terminal* can also be read as a media to advertise several kinds of American products. This is in line with the fact that movie production cannot be separated from industries as the backbone of movie business. Film as the product of popular culture defines fashion, food, magazine and gadgets for the

people. Viktor wears Hugo Boss, eats Burger king, and drinks Starbuck coffee. These small evidences show the role of film as the agent of popular culture. Furthermore, they represent all artifacts of popular culture liked by people through out the world. America is then considered as the center of fashion and lifestyle.

CONCLUSION

The discussion over film as the product of popular culture in defining American cultural identity has come to the conclusion that America always keeps her promises to be the land of immigrants, the city upon a hill, the land of hopes where all men are created equal, and the land of ethnic diversities. The two movies discussed above are only some examples of thousands other movies which offer many different perspectives toward what America is today. They define America in both good sides and bad sides. Some movies tend to be *too America* but the message is the same, Freedom—freedom of speech, freedom from religious oppression, freedom from hunger, freedom to unite.

I am not Rappaport is a comedy but it offers a deeper understanding on American history. For an Indonesian viewer, this movie can be a great inspiration for labor movement. Indonesia as a Third-world country has lots of problems with labors. Labors in Indonesia still have to fight for the betterment of their lives. The spirit of Nat Moyer can be an insight that American labors had to struggle hard to get their voices heard. It can also be seen as a story about multi ethnic matters. The friendship between Nat and Midge shows how black and

white American have a better level of relationship comparing to the era of 50s – 60s. The movie also deals with the issue of crime rate in New York. This kind of theme is commonly understood by viewers as the real America.

Meanwhile, *The Terminal* offers a different way of understanding America. The idea of pursuing happiness is wrapped with industrial products that follow the plot of the movie. It also explores the social interaction between non-white Americans and white Americans. Watching this movie is like understanding the concept of pizza as the metaphor for American assimilation. The airport represents “America” and the crowd of people is the “ethnic diversities” that shape what America today.

In short, *I am not Rappaport* is an inspiring movie. It opens the viewers’ mind on the freedom offered by America. *The Terminal*, on the other hand, is merely an entertaining movie that clearly depicts the power of industry in shaping the viewer’s mind through the products appeared in the movie. Both movies try to define American cultural identity in term of its ideology, history, social problems, and popular culture.

In an Indonesian’s perspective, those movies show how difficult it is to define the original American identity. There are at least several ideas of American cultural identity intrinsically conveyed in those two movies; American people tend to welcome others of different backgrounds, American people tend to be independent regardless their

ages, American people hold high the respect towards the right of others assuming that everyone else also has mutual respect towards others.

Nevertheless, there is not such a thing called the original American identity. Everything is repackaged and is labeled America once it entered this 'land of hopes'. American cultural identity is the ideology of a certain movie, the products consumed by the characters in the movie, the genre of the movie, the theme of the movie, the freedom to interpret American products—that is American cultural identity. Therefore, the study over culture and ethnic identity are going to be a better way to strengthen the relationship between Indonesia and America. Film/cinema/movie is the perfect artifact since it deals not only with ideas and arts but also the politics of industries as well.

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