

# Powerplay

Research sometimes serves to deconstruct power relations: to show how some groups are disenfranchised, marginalised or removed from histories of nations through literature, film or other cultural practices. Academic work, in such cases, provides theoretical and direct criticisms of how power structures, institutions, politicians and others, assert power.

Andy Fuller

## A review of two films on power:

*Performances of Authority* and *Being prominent in Indonesia, a day in the life of Ibu Mooryati*

RESEARCH PROVIDES GROUNDS for rights, representation, equality – at least in the mind, if not beyond it. Research often seems inextricably linked to causes, despite an academic's own claim to impartiality and objectivity. Sometimes an academic's cause, however, might just be to assert the importance of his or her own field. The political significance or actuality of a subject helps an academic gain prominence, funding and in some rare cases, fame beyond seminar rooms and lecture halls half-filled with familiar faces and indifferent students.

Two recent films from the KITLV<sup>1</sup> – *Performances of Authority* (*Performances* for short) by Fridus Steijlen and Deasy Simandjuntak, and *Being prominent in Indonesia, a day in the life of Ibu Mooryati* (*Being prominent* for short) by Henk Schulte Nordholt and Fridus Steijlen – present two different examples of inquiries into the power-plays and power structures of present day Indonesia.

Although both films are drawn from KITLV's *Recording the Future* project,<sup>2</sup> the two films were made in different ways. Steijlen has said that *Performances* came about after a reviewing of recorded material made throughout the eight years of this ongoing audio-visual archive project. He said that they didn't set out to film 'performances of authority', but that instead, performances of authority were revealed in their recordings of everyday life. As such, *Performances* is a gleaning of diverse material cut from recordings from

different locations and years. Locations are named, and the credits inform us that filming was completed between 2003 and 2009; viewers are thus given a taste of some of the 'performances of authority' in post-New-Order and perhaps post-*reformasi* Indonesia.

*Being prominent*, on the other hand, is an up-close and personal encounter with Indonesia's rich. Ibu Mooryati is a member of the Solonese royal family, founder of Mustika Ratu cosmetics company and a political representative. Recordings were made during several days in 2007. Andre Triadiputra (camera) and Lexy Rambadeta (camera and interviews) follow Ibu Mooryati on a tour of her 'everyday life'. The footage shows Ibu Mooryati with one of her grandsons, her personal assistant, her PhD supervisor, at a factory for her cosmetic products, at one of the Mustika Ratu spas, in parliament fulfilling the role of speaker, and at a promotional launch of traditional Javanese medicine attended by President Yudhoyono. The story of her everyday life is told in her own words and in responses to questions from the film's interviewer, Lexy Rambadeta. She speaks mostly in Indonesian, yet sometimes elaborates in Javanese or English. Javanese seems to be her language of familiarity and intimacy, while her use of English appears to be invested with a sense of authority and power.

Ibu Mooryati glides through her day, fully in control of herself and her surroundings. Yet, for brief moments, the veil of control and order is slightly dislodged: in one instance she admonishes Lexy for asking too many questions, while in another she scolds her assistant for not being on top of matters. These are rare moments and the somewhat manicured vision of Ibu Mooryati suggests that the film was intended to be made



Ibu Mooryati, Jakarta 2007.



Performer of authority, Jakarta 2003.

with her full collaboration. The lack of unguarded moments and the relative uniformity of the elite circles in which she moves, makes the film somewhat sterile, flat and lacking in conflict. But perhaps, that is the point. A different approach could have had the camera crew remaining in the background. Or, interviews could have been conducted in a more analytical manner. Perhaps these approaches could have provided a more nuanced perspective on her everyday life. But *Being prominent* shows Ibu Mooryati as she would like to see herself. As such, the viewer is given a first-hand experience of how she performs her authority – in this case, over the camera crew and over the viewer.

*Performances*, however, presents a greater opportunity for the viewer to derive meaning from the film. The film is fragmentary, questioning and postulating: it presents kinds of 'performances of authority' as practiced in everyday life in Indonesia. These range from the selected location for the new regional offices in Payakumbuh, the provision of security on the streets of Jakarta, the collection of small fees from bus drivers in Delanggu, the singing of the national anthem in Sintang and the attitudes of civil servants in Northern Maluku province.

The film is narrated through a multiplicity of voices, all representing different power structures. Interviews are carried out with both the disenfranchising and the disenfranchised. In Bintan Buyu, a narrative is given by a worker involved in the construction of a new office building, in which he speaks of corruption and malpractice. The film then cuts to an interview with a resident who is about to be removed from his property against his will and with little prospect of being appropriately reimbursed for his loss.

Authority, the film shows, is performed in many ways and by many actors. The film is not an exhaustive collection of all kinds of 'performances of authority' from the *RtF* archive; rather, it provides a model for ways in which the archives can be read.

Authority is performed through architecture, through uniforms, through body language, through paying protection money, through sitting around and guarding a foreign government representative's house. The interview with Mas Manca, a local tough guy (*preman*) in Pasar Baru, came about after he inquired as to what the crew were doing. His interview was both a skilful act to ingratiate themselves with the local and informal authority and also gave an insight into the way a local *preman* seeks to imagine his role amongst his community and how he seeks to imagine his identity. Mas Manca's manner of delivery, however, stands out from other encounters in the film – where he is smiling and opening up to the camera, others appear defensive and restrained in their comments; this is particularly evident in the "timer's" interview in Payakumbuh, when he whispers in reference to his semi-illegal role.

While *Being prominent* appears as the more complete and polished film, *Performances* raises more telling questions: it cuts closer to actual conflicts between different performers of authority and those who may or may not be the subjects of this authority. Indeed, there are moments when some of its subjects are either caught off-guard or in somewhat compromised situations. Some encounters between civil servant teachers and the candidates of civil service are particularly fraught; but is the bullying of one candidate strengthened by the presence of the camera – and the fact that the footage is being watched out of context? Elsewhere, a policeman responds in a confused manner to the interviewer's questioning. This policeman is shown to be compromised and unsure of how to articulate what his work entails (*antisipasi*). This provides a moment of humour and the viewer can ask: is one laughing at an individual, or is one laughing at a caricature of a representative of authority and power in Indonesia?

*Being prominent*, on the other hand, doesn't contain the practical dilemmas of *Performances*, for it is made in collaboration with Ibu Mooryati. The two films, each with their own set of questions about both authority and ways of documenting and filming, provide stimulating portraits of everyday life in Indonesia. They present audiovisual analyses and narratives that counter the overwhelming majority of written texts on studies of contemporary Indonesia. Moreover, the critical aspect of KITLV's *Recording the Future* project becomes apparent in these films.

**This review is based on preview editions of the two films. Some minor details of the films may have been changed in the final stages of editing prior to the films' public release in December 2011.**

Andy Fuller is a post-doctoral fellow at KITLV, Leiden. (acsfuller@gmail.com)

## Notes

1 Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies; www.kitlv.nl

2 See <http://www.kitlv.nl/home/Projects?id=20>

these years in ways which have eluded the gaze of traditional diplomatic historians, but which structured the choices, dreams, and possibilities perceived by Southeast Asians and Europeans.' (p. 13) But she seems to have eluded the diplomatic historians, and indeed missed some of the contributions they have made even to her topic.

Parts of her case are thus made to appear more novel than they really are. '(S)cholars rarely know, let alone consider the implications of, the fact that from about 1910 the United States was the key recipient of exports from British Malaya, and in most years from the Netherlands Indies.' (p. 185n.) Surely it is widely known among scholars of the region at least. They also know of the low-level intelligence contacts among the governments of the region, well discussed in Chapter One. More might have been said of Quezon's ambivalence over the prospects for an independent Philippines. The 'diplomatic historians' offer evidence of his hopes of protection from the British Commonwealth and of the concern of the British that they might be burdened with an additional responsibility.

Foster looks rather to the 'power' represented by US trade and investment, focused mainly on oil and rubber, and thus largely on the Indies. She also discusses the penetration of American consumer goods and American movies. What their impact was remains unclear. Scholars of popular culture suggest that audiences and individuals in audiences react in ways not expected by the auteurs. The author relates a nice story of a French traveller who finds montagnards watching their first Chaplin. They found none of his antics at all amusing, but laughed uproariously at the 'young heroine ... weeping glycerin tears'. (p. 96)

In such cases assessing impact is certainly problematic. Here indeed the argument seems least well supported. Foster has read widely and explored unusual sources.

But too often she makes statements or extrapolations that seem to have no clear basis just when they most need them. 'Americans touted the benefits of American cultural products for Southeast Asia. ...they believed that American cultural influence produced modernity. But equally important, many Americans believed that if Southeast Asians did develop along this American path, these Southeast Asians would evolve, perhaps slowly but steadily, into people deserving of self-rule.' (p. 74) The backing for such generalisations seems insufficient. Some of it comes from consular reports. Whether that justifies talking of 'Americans' or 'many Americans' seems doubtful. Those phrases appear too often.

A review often terminates with what some see as nit-picking. Penultimately, this reviewer finds that Foster has created a governor-general of the Straits Settlements (pp. 32, 98), and put Sir George Grindle in the Foreign Office (p. 66). Patrons could stay as long as they wished in Malayan cinemas, she notes, and so four-hour shows 'closely approximated the length of traditional entertainments' (p. 101). But the practice of sitting through long shows was true in Britain, too: in the reviewer's remote youth, a ticket would allow you to stay as long as you liked, and see the A or B movie a second time should you wish.

Ultimately, he has to conclude that he was stimulated by the book, but also irritated. And the reason was rather fundamental. The author's case has been exaggerated rather than made.

**Nicholas Tarling from the New Zealand Asia Institute (The University of Auckland) is a historian, academic, and author. He specializes in Southeast Asian history, and has written on eighteenth and nineteenth century Malaysia, North Borneo, Philippines, and Laos; especially foreign involvement in these countries. (n.tarling@auckland.ac.nz)**