

## 'Solo, Solitude' ('Istirahatlah kata kata'): Film Review

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Busan International Film Festival

Indonesian director Yosep Anggi Noen's second feature, about a dissident poet's life in hiding in a small town in 1996, bows at Rotterdam after winning the top prize at home in the Jogja Asian Film Festival.

Just like his first film *Peculiar Vacation and Other Illnesses*, Indonesian director Yosep Anggi Noen's second feature depicts a couple contending with new experiences as they grow apart. Whereas that raw debut from 2012 cruises along on quirks — the wife kickstarting her new life by delivering furniture in the countryside, the husband whiling his time away on a diet of trash television — *Solo, Solitude* is a more solemn, socially relevant and skillfully executed piece.

Revolving around a politically active poet's struggle with his self-imposed exile and his wife's equally anguished yearning for his return, *Solo, Solitude* goes well beyond simplistic sloganeering in illustrating the trauma brought about by political tyranny. Indeed, even viewers without an idea of the film's social context — that is, Indonesian dictator Suharto's violent crackdown on intellectuals and dissidents in July 1996 — will be able to engage with its protagonists' whirling internal turmoil.

After a sustained run around global festivals — bows at Locarno and Busan, for example — *Solo, Solitude* returned home to Indonesia last month and secured the top prize at the Jogja Asian Film Festival. More stops

await abroad, however, as the film returns to Europe later this month with a berth in the Bright Future section at Rotterdam.

The film's central character is Wiji Thukul, a poet well known not only for his literary endeavors but also his frontline role in combating Suharto's U.S.-backed authoritarian regime: After leading a strike at a textiles factory in 1995, Wiji was severely beaten by the police. It's a track record — unmentioned in the film — that feeds into the general social malaise gripping Indonesia at that time. As the film begins, an onscreen text explains the political schisms in the country, while official radio broadcasts are heard rallying pro-government thugs against "communists."

As *Solo, Solitude* unfolds in July 1996, Wiji (played by veteran Indonesian thespian Gunawan Maryanto) is already a marked man fleeing for his life, as he tries to settle into clandestine exile in a city in Borneo. Meanwhile, across the Java Sea and hundreds of miles away, his wife Supon (Marissa Anita) is left at home in Central Java to contend with the authorities; the film actually begins with menacing police officers interrogating her and her daughter about Wiji's whereabouts.

Bolstered by remarkable turns from his actors, Yosep manages to highlight how his protagonists are far from melodramatic martyrs of an age. These are just ordinary individuals with equally ordinary fears and desires. For all his ideals and his politically charged past, Wiji is consumed by his longing for home and a paranoia about being caught. He loses his bearings as he is forced to change his hairstyle and name, cowers in unease as he overhears soldiers' conversations at a barbershop, and measures his dwellings to prepare for a quick escape. Similarly, Supon is stoic rather than heroic, as she tends to domestic chores while countering the intrusions of an adoring neighbor.

Then again, *Solo, Solitude* is about a poet, and Yosep has done his subject justice. Surreal images — Wiji contemplating life under a weaving depicting "The Last Supper," or soldiers playing badminton inside a dilapidated cinema — punctuate those long sequences of quotidian life. Meanwhile, voiceovers feature Wiji's reciting of his poetry, or his comrades' accounts of their feverish and deadly dreams. With such a potent mix of melancholy and silent madness, *Solo, Solitude* — just like Thai director Anocha Suwichakornpong's *By the Time It Gets Dark* — offers a poignant reflection of humanity drawn from the turbulent recent histories of Southeast Asia.

<http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/review/solo-solitude-istirahatlah-kata-kata-film-review-964839>

# Solo, Solitude: On the Poetics of Politics

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For Indonesians, May 1998 means many things.

For many people, it meant chaos and confusion. For several days in 1998, from 13 to 15 May to be exact, Jakarta was unlike its usual crowded self. The city was almost empty, with a thick sense of dread hanging in the air. The only crowds prowling the streets were rioters and looters. There were also groups of students and activists protesting the government, in their campuses and outside the parliamentary building. Waiting for them were the military, mostly from the navy, who were deployed in full force for the sake of national security. Chaos ensued. Shops were ravaged, cars were burned, and students were shot. Those who were rich, or lucky enough, fled the city. Those who weren't, hid in their houses. Jakarta was not alone in witnessing such terror. Other cities include Medan, Solo, Surabaya, Padang, Palembang, and Boyolali.

For some people, May 1998 was remembered for its racial conflicts—most of the violence was targeted against the Chinese descendants. Most of the looters did not want to drive out or murder the Chinese—they simply believed that the Chinese have an infinite supply of products. So, they thought that the shops would be open again in the future, even after being looted by the masses. The riots themselves were preceded by a severe economic crisis. The food supply was in shortage, basic necessities were in demand, yet the prices in the market shot up beyond logic. Among the panic and the confusion, rumors were spread that the Chinese were responsible for the crisis. In such desperate times, it was enough to ignite the mass violence, especially with the stereotype surrounding the

Chinese descendants for years—that they are rich and stingy, and that they are the leaders in the national economy.

For the whole nation, May 1998 was the final nail in the coffin for the New Order regime. Suharto, after more than three decades in power, stepped down. A new regime, a far more democratic one, was soon installed. Historians mark this event as the dawn of democracy in Indonesia—the beginning of the Reformation era. Indeed, one of the defining features of post-98 Indonesia is direct elections. During the Suharto era, such thing was not possible—the political system was engineered by the dictator, to ensure his position in power as long as possible. There were only three political parties allowed—one of them is his own, Golongan Karya (Golkar/Party of the Functional Terms). The other two, Partai Persatuan Pembangunan (PPP/United Development Party) and Partai Demokrasi Indonesia (PDI/Indonesian Democratic Party) were curbed in terms of political influences—they were allowed to exist only to give an illusion of competition.

For Indonesian cinema, May 1998 also opened the gate for a new generation of filmmakers and a new kind of stories to emerge. Of course, other factors were at play. One of them being the technological breakthroughs at the time, which allowed more people to produce and screen their own films, which led to film communities and festivals being established all over the archipelago. Previously, film production and screenings were exclusive to the people within film schools and industry. But then, without the freedom earned after the fall of the New Order, the films produced and screened would only be limited by government restrictions, both in terms of the administrative requirements for the filmmakers and the stories allowed to be expressed through the film medium. Even though the censorship body remained in place after the Reformation, the film activities in Indonesia has been deregulated to such extent, opening up possibilities for new methods and expressions outside the established ones.

In fact, without May 1998, there wouldn't be filmmakers such as Yosep Anggi Noen and films such as *Solo, Solitude* (*Istirahatlah Kata-kata*).



## **Where there is a will, there is a word**

Like May 1998, Wiji Thukul also means many things.

He is a poet, a father, an artist, an activist, and a symbol of freedom. Born in Surakarta on 26 August 1963, Thukul came into prominence in the 1980s. After he left middle school in 1982, he travelled from villages to villages—singing, performing, and peddling his poems. It was during these travels, he was exposed to the network of political activists and intellectuals outside his hometown. And it was also during this period, Thukul's poems began to find a wider audience through publications in newspapers and magazines. In 1984, Taman Budaya Surakarta published the poet's first anthology, *Puisi Pelo (Lisping Poetry)*.

The title perfectly describes Thukul as the poet is indeed renowned for his lisp—he had trouble pronouncing *r*, making the letter sound like *l*. Yet Suharto's regime feared his words, his spoken verses. His poems are known for its harsh yet honest criticism of the regime and its colloquialism—Thukul deliberately eschews grand writerly words, in favor of everyday conversational words. That is why his poems are popular with the masses—they could be read by people from various strata, they directly address the problems the public live with everyday. Thukul literally is the voice of the people.

As an artist, Thukul's political commitment was apparent from the start. In a radio interview in 1983, a year before the publication of *Lisping Poetry*, the poet opined that most of the poetry in Indonesia was not born out of social observation. Thukul believed that poetry must be rooted in the actual condition of the people. This belief became even more nuanced when Thukul was involved in Jaringan Kerja Kebudayaan Rakyat (JAKKER/Working Group for People's Culture) in 1993.

There, Thukul met fellow pro-democracy artists, like Moelyono and Semsar Siahaan. Through the group's meetings and discussions, the poet was exposed to new knowledge and inspirations. He read Paulo Freire and Ivan Illich about pedagogy for liberation. He learned and practiced the strategy of Augusto Boal, the Brazilian artists who use theater as a means of destroying the culture of silence—the culture that makes people afraid to speak truthfully about the reality and life around them.

In 1994, Thukul led a massive strike in Sritex, a textile factory in Sukoharjo, Central Java. More than fifteen thousand labors stopped working. The police attacked the demonstrators. Thukul got beaten up, to the point he was half deaf and almost blind. It was moments like this that shaped Thukul's ideology even more. In a poem, he wrote that nothing could stop him writing. If he doesn't have a typewriter, then a drop of blood is enough for him to write poetry.

Like May 1998, Wiji Thukul brought about progress with a price to pay: his own life. After the May 1998 riots subsided and Suharto resigned from power, the poet was nowhere to be found. Many people believed that Thukul was among many activists that were

abducted by the authority—his name after all was high on the target list of Indonesian military. Eighteen years after the historic event, his whereabouts is still unknown, and the government has taken very little action to rectify that.

This, however, is not Thukul's first disappearance. Two years before that, Thukul took a self-imposed exile in Pontianak to evade the authority. It is this event that opens *Solo, Solitude*. In the film, scenes of Thukul on the run are accompanied by a deluge of words. A deluge of half-truths, to be exact, engineered by the New Order government to direct the masses to the regime's version of reality. We heard a news broadcast, delivered by a woman, regarding the riot in Jakarta on 27 July 1996. Almost simultaneously, another news broadcast followed, this time delivered by a man, accusing Partai Rakyat Demokratik (PRD/People's Democratic Party)—another group that Thukul took part in—as communists and the main culprit behind the riot.

*Solo, Solitude* never clarifies the identities of the man and the woman behind the broadcasts. Yet, if we revisited the events leading up to May 1998, there were some instances when the military tried to pin down PRD as communists. In Indonesia, “communist” has become the buzzword for every individual, group, and idea that is contrary to the government—whether they are truly communist or not, it matters not. This is the heritage of the New Order to Indonesia, a phenomenon that could be traced to the 1965 massacre, in which Suharto also took part. PRD became an easy target—also the most logical one—as Suharto allowed only three political parties within his regime.



### **The years that shook the nation**

Broadly speaking, Indonesia's history is defined by three periods: 1945, 1965, and 1998. The first marks the independence of Indonesia, while the second refers to the bloody massacre of people alleged with the growing communist movement at the time, which in turn led to the rise of Suharto and the New Order in 1966.



Of those three crucial periods, 1998 remains the least defined cinematically. The nation's independence has always been one of the most romanticized themes in Indonesian cinema, while the 1965 tragedy found its articulation through many independent films. 1998, on the other hand, has only been revisited and dissected a few times by the local filmmakers. Indeed, it took ten years for Indonesian cinema to have its first feature regarding the historic event—that is *9808: An Anthology of 10th Year Indonesian Reform*, an omnibus of ten short films directed by a group of filmmakers, released through limited screenings on 13 May 2008. Soon after that, *May*, directed by Viva Westi, hit the theaters in Indonesia on 5 June 2008—albeit for a very short time.

There are three other films regarding May 1998: *Student Movement in Indonesia* (2002), *After 15 Years* (2014), and *The Day the Sky Roared* (2015). Like the films mentioned before, these three also enjoyed limited screenings, either in commercial or arthouse theaters. The first two were documentaries directed by Tino Saroengallo. *Student Movement in Indonesia* gathers testimonies from the victims and witnesses of May 1998, while *After 15 Years* narrates the life in post-Reformation Indonesia through several activists and public figures. *The Day the Sky Roared* is a ten-minute short directed by Jason Iskandar, portraying the chaos of the 1998 riots through the eyes of a little girl.

Only five films for such a historic event, in the time when it is much freer to express ideas and thoughts criticizing the regime. This is a problem worth pondering.

Cinema as medium of expression has played a vital role in shaping the people's perspectives regarding themselves and their place in history. Indonesia is no exception. We could point at how Suharto's regime brainwash the masses regarding the 1965 tragedy, by producing a docu-drama titled *Pengkhianatan G30S PKI (The Betrayal of G30S PKI)*, in which the Partai Komunis Indonesia (PKI/Indonesian Communist Party) were portrayed as the God-hating forces that plotted against the government. Suharto, of course, is glorified as the man that saved the nation from the coup attempt. The New Order regime televised the *Pengkhianatan G30S PKI* annually and made the film mandatory viewing for students on 30 September. For many years, images of the film shape the popular imagination of Indonesians regarding communists and the 1965 tragedy.

The Reformation era brought about myriad counter-narratives to the New Order propaganda on the 1965 tragedy. The most notable, of course, are the two Joshua Oppenheimer documentaries: *The Act of Killing* in 2012 and *The Look of Silence* in 2014. But then, even before those two films were released in their respective years, Indonesian filmmakers has produced films, both fiction and documentary, regarding the 1965 massacre almost every year since 1998. In total, there are 47 films.

These films were shown to the public through independent screenings in various cities, and often were accompanied by discussion by victims, witnesses, and activists. Indeed, the public opinion are still divided regarding the 1965 tragedy. Some still prefer to believe

the New Order's propaganda, while others begin to question it. But then, such diversity of opinions is still much better compared to the single undisputed belief that was prevalent during the New Order era. Diversity encourages dialogues, and dialogues often lead to change.

1998 is no less important than 1965. Suharto's regime formed much of the history of post-independence Indonesia. For thirty-two years, the New Order shapes the nation's culture, politics, and economics for its own end. The consequences are still felt until now, and that is why we urgently need Indonesian filmmakers to look back toward the turning points of their nation's history. After all, 1998 is still not so far back, and cinema is a way to retrace the nation's history, to redefine the eras that shape the people.



### **Politics through the poetics of cinema**

*Solo, Solitude* becomes a breakthrough because of such condition. Fittingly, the film defines Wiji Thukul through two things: absence and language. Indeed, those are the two things people readily associate with Thukul. More than that, absence and language perfectly articulate the significance of the year 1998 for Indonesia.

In the film, Yosep Anggi Noen and his team chose to explore the former in depth. The latter is consigned to voiceovers, which is actually a strategic narrative decision. After all, with or without the film, Thukul's reputation as a poet is an already established fact. The filmmakers put more emphasis on the poet's roles as a father and a husband. His activism and literary career is articulated to the audience only as consequences that impacted the family's unity and togetherness. This is apparent since the film's opening scene. A government agent asked Thukul's wife, "Where is your husband?" Silence. His children were also questioned. Again, silence. Nobody dared to say a single word, for the sake of the poet's safety.

Indeed, it is Thukul's absence that is still unexplained to this very day. It is also his absence that truly defines the New Order's regime of terror. What has often been missing, both in Indonesian cinema and the public discourse, is how a fascistic regime could take



power in Indonesia. The New Order era is worth to be discussed not only because of the countless victims it claimed, but also because of the conditions that allowed Suharto to take power, and the methods used by the regime to remain in power for such a long time.

*Solo, Solitude* sheds a light on such historical conundrum, by highlighting Thukul's self-imposed exile in Pontianak in 1996. What should be noted is that the film interprets the poet's struggle less as a political action, more as a psychological struggle. The story arc lies on Wiji Thukul's effort to cope and overcome his fear. He spent much of the film in paranoia—asking nervously to his ally whether there is another door for escape, measuring the walls around his hiding place in case he needs to make a quick getaway. He dared not to step outside, fearing the regime had prepared a trap to take him into custody.

That paranoia is translated beautifully in the film's visual grammar. *Solo, Solitude* keeps its audience in suspense all the time. Everything outside the poet is deliberately kept ambiguous by the filmmakers. The film restricts our perspective to Thukul and the very few people he met during his hiding in Pontianak. The world outside the poet is represented only by his wife, Sipun or Dyah Sujirah, who waited for his husband to return. And also by stories, told by Thukul's friends, regarding the fate of the poet's colleagues in various cities, who either disappeared or were apprehended by the authorities. We never see how they disappeared, or how the regime managed to capture them, and that is exactly how the New Order government controlled the masses in its heyday. The regime planted stories and myths, and sometimes displayed unknown corpses in public places, just to spread fear and ensure the public won't step out of their line.

In one scene, in the barbershop where Thukul wanted to get a haircut, a soldier narrated a mission he and his division once undertook in Yogyakarta. They killed the thugs, or "anybody with a tattoo", and left their corpses for the public to see, so the people "would respect and, more importantly, fear the regime". Why they are killed is never explained to the public. What is offscreen, although inexplicable, is just as important as what is onscreen—the New Order politics through the poetics of cinema.

It was also because of this psychological portrayal of Thukul, *Solo, Solitude* separates itself from many biopics of Indonesian freedom fighters. In the film, history is not explored and presented as mere physical reenactments of times and events gone by. Instead, the film delves into the past to raise fundamental questions about what it means to be a citizen, particularly in the context of our government's failings. Because, in the end, the greatest patriotism is to tell your country when it is behaving dishonorably, foolishly, and viciously.

Yet *Solo, Solitude* manages to evade all the usual clichés of the revolutionaries. The film does not romanticize Thukul as some kind of superhuman—a single driving factor in bringing about changes in the nation's history. In the film, Thukul is a mere human, who is sometimes powerless in his struggle against tyranny and injustice. It was only natural that he felt fear. Thukul's fear represents the public's fear, the very people he fought for. It was

that same fear that encourages the poet to step out of his hiding, return to his home in Surakarta, went to Jakarta to join the masses in overthrowing the New Order regime, and disappeared in the process. His absence, unexplained until now, is not only a monument for us to pay respect to, but also as a lesson for the future of our nation. After all, those who fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it.

Thukul is not Indonesia's greatest poet. He is certainly not the only casualty of the New Order government. But he is one of the most important stories in the history of Suharto's bloody regime. For many, he defines what Reformation era is all about.

<http://cinemapoetica.com/solo-solitude-on-the-poetics-of-politics/>



## Indonesia's Long Lost Poet is Awakening Questions About The Past

STANLEY WIDIANTO Feb 22 2017, 4:15pm



**Indonesian poet Wiji Thukul disappeared over a decade ago during political turmoil. But with the release of his biopic *Istirahatlah Kata-kata*, his words are awakening once more**

Widji Widodo was born in Solo, Central Java to a rickshaw driving father and a mother who sold streetside fried chicken. He was a brash-speaking, thin and perennially restless man who went by the name Wiji Thukul. This was not the kind of man films are made about. But hundreds of people came to Taman Ismail Marzuki in Central Jakarta to watch a movie about his life

Between 1994 and 1998, he lived his life as an outlaw. Clandestinely crossing islands and cities, using friends homes as hideouts, looking for the nearest escape route and barely seeing his family. He was a Catholic with a lisp that made it hard to pronounce R's, fellow activist Prijo Wasono said, "he liked to wear a white shirt that was no longer white."

Workers rights were often at the core of his activism after founding the art collective, Jaringan Kerja Kebudayaan Rakyat (Jaker) under the People's Democratic Party (PRD). Depending on who you ask, the PRD was trying to overthrow Soeharto's regime or promote workers rights. Wiji's life was increasingly defined by the message of revolt. It was never bloody, unlike his right eye that military personnel bashed it with a gun, he stood in solidarity with workers. Like the 14,000 laborers of PT Sri Rejeki Isman he joined to demonstrate for higher wages in 1995.

Activism was seen throughout his bluntest weapon, poetry. He thought of himself as "the president's nightmare" ("Nyanyian Akar Rumput"). Oppression to him was "the most honest of teachers" ("Pepatah Buron") and anything challenging it makes generals "angry" ("Para Jenderal Marah-Marah"). He wrote what people referred to as "pamphlet poetry," easily consumable by the masses. He's seen as one of Indonesia's great literary figures, as writer Armah Dhani argues in his **piece**.

"Poetry is eternal, it can be taught every time. Reading it should help people to understand the situation that made it necessary for it to be written in the first place," Wahyu Susilo, Wiji's younger brother told me when asked if Wiji's poetry should be taught in schools. His brother carried on Wiji's legacy on workers rights by working as an analyst at Migrant Care, an NGO focused on migrant workers rights.

A fatal riot broke out in the headquarters of the Indonesian Democratic Party (PDI) in July 1996. It was a desperate bid to elect Megawati Soekarnoputri as president in order to finally end Suharto's 32-year New Order regime. The regime painted PRD as the perpetrators, triggering a witch hunt that sent Wiji on the run. Eventually the hunt ended in May 1998, resulting in the unsolved **disappearance** of 13 people, including Wiji. Since then, he has been a poster boy for silenced, displaced people; for unresolved ordeals. If broken democracy had a face, it would have his scrawny, unkempt one.

I got an insight into Wiji's last few months before his disappearance. *Istirahatlah Kata-Kata*, a film by director Yosep Anggi Noen, chronicles Wiji's seven-months on the lam to Pontianak, West Kalimantan. A city where folks knew him by three names, Paul, Martinus Martin and Aloysius Sumedi. Theatre actor Gunawan Maryanto portrays Wiji throughout the quiet film. Maryanto was transformed into the famous poet, right down to the fake, protruding teeth. Wiji's poems help drive the narrative through a voiceover, his constant fear felt clear and unwavering.

Novelist and executive producer Okky Madasari thinks the enthusiasm behind the film is fueled by Indonesians yearning to dig up secrets buried in the past. "Like Wiji, they'll also remember what it feels like to be abandoned and erased by the country," she **wrote** in an op-ed. The film portrays Wiji as a human affected yet unfazed by fear, and also as a family member that was out of the picture and would remain so. It traverses the stealth and confrontational nature of his poetry. For most people watching it, the filmmaker said, they already feel as if they have lived this story.

To us, Wiji is nothing more than a story convincingly told. Sure, we know something about the people he left behind, but little is actually known about him. His wife Siti Dyah Sujirah is a tailor in Solo and **suffered from depression** over the loss of her husband. Fitri Nganti Wani, their daughter, is an Indonesian literature graduate from Universitas Sanata Dharma, she released a book of poetry called *Selepas Bapakku Hilang*. Fajar Merah. Their son, is a musician in a band called Merah Bercerita, their **self-titled album** contains 4 songs that adapt Wiji's poems as lyrics, including "Bunga dan Tembok" which plays during the film's final act.

"I like the ending: It dramatizes things and that the film has more quiet, stoic scenes about. I prefer a quiet scene, because it gives time for our minds and thoughts to race. We think to ourselves, 'Oh so this is what it feels like to be a fugitive'," Fajar tells me.

Most assume given the time that's passed, Wijir's children are at peace with what happened. "Not really. Because I have a band, too, right? Often times we get asked questions about dad, well it makes sense, because I'm his kid. Truth is I don't know a lot about dad—how his memory lives on. Occasionally when people share with me memories about dad, that rattles me a little. Because when it hurts, I get reminded that I'm in pain," he says.

What I assumed, that Fajar idolizes his father, made me feel kind of foolish. Of course, there are still things unresolved; there will still be those reminders in Fajar's life. "Yes, it can be intrusive if the questions asked by reporters are stupid and looking for sensational stuff. I like them when they're a lot more probing," Wahyu tells me.

I did get one thing right: That Wiji was a brave man, considering the circumstances he found himself in. "He was whatever he wanted to be. A writer, an idealist who wrote about the poor, about the rights that are taken, about freedom that is compromised. At the time, there wasn't a lot of people like him. In general, people choose the well beaten path and if they get into trouble or whatever, it was normal. That he chose the hard way, that's amazing," Fajar says.

However the film turns out, it exists as a text of Wiji's life. It can also be a reminder for us. *Aku mung pengen kowe ono*, Sipon says in the film; Javanese for *I need you to exist*. And on the poem that gave the movie its name ("Istirahatlah Kata-Kata"), Wiji wrote,

*Be asleep these words*

*We'll awake later*

*We'll heed all the demands*

*Of those poor and destroyed*

However the film turns out, these words have awoken.

[https://www.vice.com/en\\_id/article/indonesias-long-lost-poet-is-awakening-questions-about-the-past](https://www.vice.com/en_id/article/indonesias-long-lost-poet-is-awakening-questions-about-the-past)