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The Living Landscape of Jakarta in Leonard Retel Helmrich's Documentary Triptych

Annelies van Noortwijk and Vincent Ros

Filmed over the course of almost two decades, Leonard Retel Helmrich's documentary triptych *Eye of the Day* (2001), *Shape of the Moon* (2004) and *Position Among the Stars* (2010) has met with international critical acclaim.¹ Focusing on the lives of three generations of a lower-class Christian Indonesian family, these films offer a unique insight into the hectic life of the slums of Jakarta (Figs. 8.1 and 8.2). They present the landscape of Jakarta not as a collection of places and streets, but rather, as a living, breathing organism of immense complexity; a locus for the activities of millions of people, who struggle daily to achieve different dreams, who sweat, haggle, laugh and toil, who enjoy their free time or strive for spiritual purity, and whose lives are affected by a multitude of ongoing social, economic, political and religious changes that are taking place in the first decade of Post-Suharto Indonesia. The urban landscape of Jakarta, as seen from the intimate perspective of the Sjamsuddin family, is first and foremost a landscape of people—who in these documentaries are not reduced to victims or representatives of social, political or religious groups, but who are instead treated as individuals; as unique, active, emotional, embodied and empowered subjects.

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Fig. 8.1 The street life of the *kampong* in *Eye of the Day* (2001) and *Shape of the Moon* (2004). Courtesy Scarabefilms

Fig. 8.2 The street life of the *kampong* in *Eye of the Day* (2001) and *Shape of the Moon* (2004). Courtesy Scarabefilms

Perhaps the most remarkable quality of these documentaries is their ability to completely immerse viewers in the vibrant, living landscape of Indonesia as a whole, and that of Jakarta in particular. Step Vaessen, anchorwoman of Al-Jazeera, who lives and works in Jakarta, summarizes the

impression these films made upon her: ‘These are by far the best and most beautiful films I know on Indonesia. . . . You can feel the country; you taste the ambience, the films make you feel as if you were present in the streets of the *Kampung* [the slums of Jakarta]. I even thought I could smell them’ (Zomergasten 2011).

Retel Helmrich’s innovative cinematographic style (which he has dubbed ‘Single Shot Cinema’) plays a significant role in achieving this reality effect. The true innovation of this series, however, transcends the level of technical cinematography, and is instead found in the deeply personal vision of Indonesia it presents and the respectful and intimate way it portrays its subjects. As such, these films can be seen as exemplary of the ‘subjective turn’ that is currently taking place in documentary film-making. This is based on a re-evaluation and repositioning of the role of the documentary subject, from the status of passive subject or victim of social circumstance to that of active, empowered individual. It also encompasses a ‘meta-modern’ rethinking of the purpose of documentary beyond a post-modern disillusionment with the project of capturing ‘reality’ singular and toward the embracement of subjective, personal, individual and pluralistic perspectives. Within Retel Helmrich’s film-making, an integral part of this undertaking is the representation of the slums of Jakarta as a *living* landscape.

A LIVING LANDSCAPE

Eye of the Day is the first part of Retel Helmrich Sjamsuddin family trilogy. It opens with the following caption:

INDONESIA, A population of 200 million, political chaos and a depressed economy. Everyone tries to find a way to survive. Among them, Rumidjah and her sons Bakti and Dwi.

With this exposition, the film-maker’s agenda is clearly defined: we are to experience the turbulent social, political and economic dynamics of Indonesia during the *Reformasi* from the perspective of a lower-class family. We can view and understand how this achieved through an analysis of a sequence of scenes occurring 10 minutes into the film.

From shots of a tumultuous gathering at a hand-out of food rations, from which Rumidjah returns empty-handed, we cut to the living room of the Sjamsuddin family. Here, we are suddenly part of a private family situation, as we witness protagonists Rumidjah, Bakti and Dwi arguing about Bakti’s

inability to keep a job. The argument ends with Bakti getting a job as *kenèk* (assistant) on a local bus line. The camera follows his busy rhythm as he collects and sells tickets and flirts with female passengers. In another sequence, the streets of Jakarta are surveyed in long, inclusive tracking movements. A stray cat slinks through the gutter, while a vendor carries geese to the market. A group of old men try on prosthetic teeth at a market stall. People press against each other as vehicles try to pass. Meanwhile, a man dressed in white garb hands out pamphlets for the *Jihad* (holy war) to drivers who are waiting at the traffic lights. The sequence ends with a return to the cat, who leaves through a back alley. In these sequences, which are emblematic of the narrative and cinematographic style of the trilogy as a whole, we experience the landscape of the Jakarta from street level. The eye of the camera meanders through the bustle of Jakarta, picking out relevant details and allowing itself to be led by the currents of interactions between the inhabitants. From this perspective, we quickly come to realize that the landscape of Jakarta, and that of the slums in particular, is a human landscape.

The architecture of the *kampung*, with its tightly packed houses and claustrophobic, maze-like alleys, clearly reflects the tightly knit, bustling community that inhabits it. Moving through the streets of the *kampung*, one gets the sense that its people exist in constant dynamic interaction with each other. The boundaries between the living room and the streets are blurred. Neighbors visit each other without invitation or meet each other on the streets. During the day, the streets throng with human activity. Vendors peddle their wares, people transport live animals to the market, and a Muslim procession calls for souls to join their holy war. Even at night, the streets are bustling with activity, as young men like Bakti gather outside to drink, gamble and eat snacks from one of the many vendors (Figs. 8.1 and 8.2). The *kampung* never sleeps; it is a complex, restless organism that suffers from a severe case of insomnia. There appears to be a strong sense of community among the individual cells that make up this organism; people help out their neighbors as a matter of course, even if most people are struggling to feed themselves. This is demonstrated in a scene where Rumidjah is called upon to share an apple with an elderly neighbor. The apple, clearly a valuable delicacy, is the subject of a long discussion before Rumidjah finally, reluctantly, agrees to share it. Her initial selfishness, and even her desire to provide for her children, is eventually outweighed by her sense of duty to the community.

Both church and mosque play an important role in organizing the exchange of services and goods among neighbors in the *kampung*. This can be understood from the depiction of phenomena such as the apples given out by the church, the patrols of the Muslim neighborhood watch, and the organized aid provided for the victims of a fire. The sequence that most dramatically underlines the sense of community among the inhabitants of the slum is found in *Shape of the Moon*, where we see how all the young men of the neighborhood work together in a valiant but ultimately futile attempt to put out a fire, which reduces an entire block to ashes before the Jakartan fire brigade finally arrives (Figs. 8.3 and 8.4).

While the social dynamics of the *kampung* may be exemplary of Jakarta as a whole, this particular scene highlights the differences that exist between the *kampung* and the larger city. Judging by the late arrival of the fire brigade, it would appear that the *kampung* is of little importance to city officials and is very much left on its own. This corresponds to the historical development of the Indonesian *kampungs*: these neighborhoods were originally villages that were ‘swallowed up’ as Jakarta expanded, and many of them are still not officially recognized as being part of the city. As a result, *kampungs* tend to have limited facilities, and lack the necessary connections to the sewage system, water supply and electricity network of the larger city. City officials treat the inhabitants of the *kampung* with little more respect

Fig. 8.3 Men working together to put out a fire in *Shape of the Moon* (2004). Courtesy Scarabeefilms

Fig. 8.4 Men working together to put out a fire in *Shape of the Moon* (2004). Courtesy Scarabefilms

Fig. 8.5 Pest extermination in *Position among the Stars* (2010). Courtesy Scarabefilms

than the rats and cats living in its gutters, as is illustrated by a scene in *Position Among the Stars* where official pest exterminators come to spray the neighborhood unannounced, causing a panic as inhabitants flee to stay clear of the toxic fumes (Figs. 8.5 and 8.6).

Fig. 8.6 Pest extermination in *Position among the Stars* (2010). Courtesy Scarabeefilms

Essentially the people of these city-villages fend for themselves as they always have, in spite of being, at the same time, part of the greater whole of Jakarta (Surya 2008: 8–11; Sihombing 2004: 1). In this position, the people in the *kampung* share in some of the luxuries of city life, such as relatively easy access to education and entertainment, but also share in many of its problems. Crime, unemployment, alcoholism and gambling are all phenomena inherent in big-city life that also pervade the *kampung*. This ambiguous relationship between the *kampung* and the larger city causes elderly people like Rumidjah to long for the old days and a more authentic village life.

Although the busy landscape of the *kampung* serves as the trilogy's narrative and thematic center, it is contrasted with other landscapes (most notably, the remains of the traditional village or *desa*² outside Jakarta and of the affluent parts of Jakarta). When Rumidjah returns to her village in *Eye of the Day*, we learn that the sense of community among inhabitants of the *desa* is even stronger than it was in the *kampung*. This is underlined by the scene in which the entire village works together to lift up Rumidjah's house, transport it across a distance of 10 or 20 meters, and place it on a new foundation. In many ways, Rumidjah's return to the village is the return to a more natural, more honest and more social way of life, which she imagined

Fig. 8.7 Rumidjah trying to reconnect with village life in *Positions among the Stars* (2010). Courtesy Scarabeefilms

it would be. At the same time, it is a journey back in time, from urban times to pre-modern life, which turns out to be more difficult for Rumidjah than she expected (Figs. 8.7 and 8.8). While the landscape of the *desa* may seem like a paradise compared to the grimy, claustrophobic streets of the *kampong*, we learn quickly that it suffers from its own problems, namely a total lack of employment and amenities, which seems to have caused most young people to abandon it in favor of life in the city.

The instances where the *kampong* is contrasted with richer parts of Jakarta are less frequent but similarly striking. In *Position Among the Stars*, Tari and her girlfriends take a taxi through one of the rich neighborhoods of Jakarta, and the contrast with the *kampong* is stark; where in the *kampong* we see people huddled together in tiny rooms and narrow alleys, here, each family lives in its own, enormous, gaudy mansion, separated from their neighbors by a well-kept lawn and a white fence. These scenes make the economic inequality all too obvious, yet Tari and her girlfriends smile as they look at these houses: this is the ‘Indonesian dream’ their parents are telling them to follow. For the Sjamsuddin family, Tari’s education is prized because it represents the first step in realizing this dream.

By showing us the landscape of the *kampong* from the perspective of the streets, these films enable us to fully immerse ourselves in it. We are shown the dynamic interactions among neighbors that give rise to its diverse and

Fig. 8.8 Rumidjah trying to reconnect with village life in *Positions among the Stars* (2010). Courtesy Scarabeefilms

hectic atmosphere and come to understand how the jumbled, maze-like architecture forms an *extension* of the social landscape. The *kampung* is a project of perpetual *bricolage*, an improvised jumble of complementary and conflicting ideas that reflects the dynamic interaction between the personal needs of its inhabitants and more or less spontaneous forms of communal decision making. At the heart of this maze stand individual subjects; Rumidjah, Bakti, Dwi and Tari, representing the past, present and future of Indonesia. These three generations can be seen as representative of the different stages of the development of Indonesia from a pre-modern, rural society to an urban society, and finally to a global, cosmopolitan society. In Indonesia, as in other former colonies in Asia, the previous stages of development continue to exist side-by-side with the cosmopolitan stage, even at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Just as the *kampung* forms a kind of microcosm within the larger city while being intimately connected with it, each individual subject in this documentary triptych is portrayed as an embodiment of individual values, beliefs and preferences, which are themselves part of larger communities and associations—the village, the family, the church, the mosque, the *kampung*, Jakarta and Indonesia as a whole. These individual subjects are integrated constituents of the *kampung's living* landscape.

THE META-MODERN SUBJECT

As Michael Renov pointed out in 2004, ‘the subject in documentary has, to a surprising degree, become the subject of documentary’ (xxiv). This turn toward the subject can be described in two ways: as a renewed interest in the faithful representation of documentary subjects as complex, embodied and empowered individuals—‘real’ human beings rather than victims or representatives of classes, organizations or ideologies—and second, as the embracement of documentary’s potential as a medium for subjective expression. Leonard Retel Helmrich’s Indonesia triptych is exemplary of both these trends. The treatment of Bakti, who is most representative of Indonesia’s present, illustrates the first trend in action.

When we meet Bakti in *Eye of the Day*, he is working as a *kenek* (servant) on a bus line. It quickly becomes apparent that this is just a temporary job, and that he has never had regular employment. He is a man of the streets, a natural inhabitant of the *kampong*. Whenever he is not working (which is most of the time), we find him in the streets, drinking with his friends or gambling on pet fights. On the occasions where he is shown at home, we see him arguing with his mother, who wants him to get a steady job, and marry a good woman. The limited exploration of his character undergoes gradual development over the course of the series.

In *Shape of the Moon* we see Bakti convert to Islam in order to be able to marry a Muslim woman, Sri. While a scene where he confers with an imam regarding the legality of his marriage suggests that he chooses to convert for purely practical reasons, the event does mark a significant step in his character development. Although he appears lax in his commitment to his religious duties (in *Position Among the Stars*, his niece Tari remarks that he rarely visits the mosque), the fact that he is now a married Muslim allows him to be appointed to *Ketua RT* (district supervisor). This new position comes with a range of duties and responsibilities that imbue him with new-found pride.

Shape of the Moon also marks another important turning point for Bakti: his assumption of parental duties for twelve-year-old niece Tari. Following a fire that destroys the neighborhood church, his mother Rumidjah, who, saying she is too old and tired for life in Jakarta, returns to the village of her youth (Figs. 8.7 and 8.8), leaving her granddaughter Tari (whose mother dies far too young) and her son Bakti behind in Jakarta. The girl and her grandmother have a very strong bond, but this bond suffers a blow in a

heart-wrenching scene where Tari discovers that Rumidjah's plans to leave the city are serious.

Although Rumidjah's return to the country is only temporary, Bakti effectively becomes Tari's parent, a role for which he may be poorly equipped, but to which he is nevertheless strongly committed. Tari is an excellent student and the entire family hopes she will achieve what they could not. How strongly Bakti feels about securing a bright future for her becomes clear when he scolds her for spending time with a boyfriend in *Position Among the Stars*:

We want you to achieve something and not become like me. When I was thirteen, I had to make money at a bus station, when your grandfather became unemployed. For all of us . . . grandmother, Sri and me, uncle Dwi, you are our star. Concentrate yourself on your studies. I will work hard to pay for them. Your grandmother is not the only one who loves you.

On the one hand, we witness Bakti's development, in gaining maturity and assuming responsibility. On the other hand, Bakti's story never becomes a morality tale. He never finds enlightenment as a result of his marriage, his increased status or his new-found faith. Beneath the responsible adult, his hoodlum personality continues to exist. We see this, for example, in the scene where he uses the blessed water given out by the mosque for his fighting fish, provoking the fury and sadness of his wife (Fig. 8.9), and in the scene where he helps his brother Dwi to fool the government inspectors (*Position Among the Stars*). Dwi's cynical comment that 'no government in the world cares about its people' is characteristic of the Indonesian people's disillusionment with the *Reformasi*; while the government has been replaced, the political culture of corruption that existed under Suharto remains unchanged (Fig. 8.10). No one feels too guilty about fooling the government when the government continually fools its own people.

Bakti emerges as a multidimensional character, who cannot be reduced to any one of his many conflicting aspects. This multifaceted portrayal creates a depth to his character that is atypical of the traditional documentary subject, who is generally reduced to an exemplum of a class or a group. Bakti is both representative of the average 'young man of the slums' and completely his own, unique human being. He is both victim of circumstance and architect of his own fate. As such, his representation illustrates the widespread re-evaluation of the subject in contemporary documentary

Fig. 8.9 Marital struggles between Bakti and Sri in *Position Among the Stars* (2010). Courtesy Scarabeefilms

Fig. 8.10 Dwi: 'No government in the world cares about its people', in *Position Among the Stars* (2010). Courtesy Scarabeefilms

cinema (Beattie 2004; Bondebjerg 2003; Bruzzi 2006; Rosenthal and Corner 2005; Navarro and Spence 2011; Nichols 2010; Renov 2004; Winston 2008, 2013).

SUBJECTIVE REALISM: THE META-MODERN FILM-MAKER

Retel Helmrich, a film-maker of Dutch-Javanese heritage, graduated from the Dutch Film and Television Academy in 1986. He became interested in documenting the social, political and economic changes in Indonesia in the mid-1990s. After being arrested at a political rally and forced to leave the country for several years, he returned and dedicated himself to following three generations of a lower-class family from the slums of Jakarta. The material this yielded was shaped into three consecutive films: *Eye of the Day*, *Shape of the Moon* and *Position Among the Stars*. Over the course of his career, Retel Helmrich developed a special cinematographic method, which he calls Single Shot Cinema. He describes this method as ‘an intimate *cinéma vérité* film technique that enables a scene to be shot in a single take using just one camera moving fluidly around the subject—recording all the camera angles that express the film-maker’s personal perception of that moment’ (Comodo Rigs 2015).

Inspired by André Bazin’s love for the long take and deep focus, Single Shot Cinema (SSC) avoids unnecessary editing by filming scenes as uninterrupted tracking shots whenever possible and repositioning the camera in relation to its center of attention. For this purpose, Retel Helmrich developed the *Orbit*, a special, lightweight camera handle, that enabled increased mobility and maneuverability compared to existing steady-cam systems (IDFA 2015; Comodo Rigs 2015; Retel Helmrich 2015). This helps the viewer to identify closely with the character’s subjective, embodied experiences as it pursues them through the landscape of Jakarta, often literally orbiting around them. Wherever the subjects move, they remain the fixed point of our experience.³

Similar to the Direct Cinema documentary style of the 1960s, the SSC method avoids the use of voice-overs and interviews, and shows, rather than tells, how subjects are connected. The cameraman, who remains invisible to the viewer, follows his subjects in their own environment, moving silently around and between them, filming them constantly from many different angles. Although it is difficult to determine to what extent some of these scenes are staged, it often appears as if the protagonists are so used to Retel

Helmrich's presence that they hardly notice him, allowing him to capture even very intimate family situations spontaneously.

On the editing table, this method of shooting is coupled with a style of associative editing that visually matches the movement, rhythm or theme of each shot to that of the previous shot. These combined techniques create a degree of lucidity and mobility that enables these documentaries to tell their stories through camera movement and montage alone.

By citing Bazin's notion of 'cinematic realism' as a major source of inspiration (Retel Helmrich 2015) and prescribing a cinematographic method that is reminiscent of Direct Cinema's 'fly on the wall' approach, the SSC method appears to revive the idea of 'objective' documentary—a notion that many would criticize as belonging to the 'rationalist dream of universal reason ... and the belief in disinterested knowledge' (Renov 1995). In post-modern documentary theory, it is commonly accepted that it is impossible to represent reality without imposing the subjective frame of one's own experience upon it.⁴ Furthermore, Bazin's claim that the photographic image has a more direct indexical relation to reality than a painting or sculpture and therefore holds a higher claim to objectivity (Bazin 1960: 4–9) no longer corresponds to the practice of photography and film-making in the current age of digital image manipulation.

To the cursory eye of the post-modern documentary theorist, Single Shot Cinema may appear to be reliving the impossible dream of Direct Cinema, yet this criticism may be unfounded. In a 2013 lecture Retel Helmrich defended Bazin's notion of 'objective reality' as follows:

Bazin's position in 'objective reality' can easily be misunderstood ... it is important to point out that he doesn't think of 'realist' films in the way of an objective documentary that—like a fly on the wall—is only observing and recording what's happening. Instead he reminds us that it's essential for film—as for any form of art—to select what it shows. (Retel Helmrich 2015: 2)

From the same lecture we learn that Retel Helmrich's goal was never to deliver an objective record of reality. While he maintains a Bazinian faith in cinema's ability to capture reality, he sees the film-maker's subjectivity as an integral part of that reality:

The filmmaker gets his opinion across to the audience by using his own emotional feeling to choose the right angles and do the right orbits, but the

audience will experience the feelings as their own. Actually the filmmaker makes himself invisible in giving his own opinion and feeling, by the way he films his subjects, using words instead of images, and the way he moves his camera. The images seem objective but in fact they are more subjective than images shot from a physical point of view. They are shot from an emotional point of view. Emotional subjectivity. This is not manipulative because the images are real, and so is the emotion of the filmmaker. The filmmaker shoots reality but in the way he does that he shows his opinion about that reality. (5)

Rather than pursuing an outdated and ultimately unattainable ideal of objective, disinterested reality, Single Shot Cinema in fact embraces a broader, more inclusive concept of reality, of which the intuitive, subjective perspective of the film-maker forms as much a part as the event that is represented. Therefore, rather than associating Single Shot Cinema with a modernist search for objective truth, it may be more appropriate to link it to a development that moves beyond a post-modern disillusionment with reality solely toward the embracement of diverse perspectives on reality as equally valuable and truthful. If modernity was driven by a search for cruxes of truth, post-modernism can be seen as its final crisis. Post-modernism made us aware that 'truth' is always based on cultural and subjective values and embedded in discourses of power (van Heusden 2010–2011). While this realization led to a renewed interest in different cultures, it also led initially to a reduced interest in reality and a form of relativism in which the truth of a statement became dependent almost solely on the voice, or *ethos*, of its speaker. The problem with this development is that Western, white, male voices continue to dominate almost every area of global culture.

Moving beyond such relativism, contemporary culture displays renewed interests in dealing with reality, but now embarks upon this project guided by the post-modern awareness of the inherently subjective and constructed nature of truth. Rather than placing subjectivity in direct opposition to reality, contemporary culture accepts subjectivity as *an integral part of reality*. In doing so, it embraces more diverse and plural perspectives on reality as holding equal claim to validity, finally granting a genuine voice to many groups and individuals that never really had one. In documentary, we see how the 'subject' has grown from a passive participant into an embodied, emotional and empowered individual, perfectly capable of expressing themselves in their own terms. For this development, which both evolves from and transcends post-modernism, we propose the term *metamodernity* (Noortwijk 2014).

Retel Helmrich's statements support our reading of him as a meta-modern film-maker. He emphasizes how Single Shot Cinema seeks to engage with the reality of the world through the personal, emotional, subjective lens of the film-maker. Furthermore, he has embraced his own subjectivity as forming an integral part of the reality he seeks to capture. In doing so, he has accepted the impossibility of objectivity without abandoning the project of engaging with reality that is at the heart of the documentary format. The true innovation of this series, however, transcends the level of technical cinematography, and is instead found in the deeply personal vision of the living landscape of Jakarta that it presents and the respectful and intimate way it portrays its subjects. As such, these films can be seen as exemplary of the 'subjective turn' that is currently taking place in documentary film-making, which entails a re-evaluation of the role of the documentary subject from that of passive subject or victim of social circumstance to that of active, empowered individual. They also epitomize a meta-modern re-thinking of the purpose of documentary, going beyond a post-modern disillusionment with the project of capturing reality singular and toward the embracement of subjective, personal, individual and plural perspectives on reality.

NOTES

1. Some major awards Retel Helmrich received for *Shape of the Moon* (2004) are the Grand Joris Ivens Award of the IDFA, Amsterdam (2004) and the Grand World Documentary Award of the Sundance Film Festival US (2005). For *Position among the Stars* (2010) Helmrich was awarded the Grand VPRO/IDFA Award, Amsterdam (2010) and the Sundance Special Jury Award (2011).
2. A *desa* is a traditional settlement in a rural area (Sihombing 2004: 1).
3. The technicalities of the Orbit and the novel cinematographic effects and methods of representation this new device allows for will be discussed in Annelies van Noortwijk, 'The Orbit', in Giovanna Fossati and Annie van den Oever (ed.), *The Film Archive as a Research Laboratory* (Noortwijk, 2016).
4. For some of the most recent publications related to this subject by outstanding documentary theorists, among them Stella Bruzzi, John Corner, John Dovey, Alisa Lebow, Bill Nichols, Carl Plantinga, Michael Renov and Brian Winston, see Brian Winston, ed., *The Documentary Filmbook* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

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