

ART IMITATING REALITY: THE SCREENING AND NON-SCREENING OF THE FILM *BALIBO* AND THE ONGOING STRUGGLE FOR TRUTH RECOVERY AND HUMAN RIGHTS IN INDONESIA AND TIMOR-LESTE

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Introduction

This article is a ‘real to reel’ case study, focusing on the recent feature film *Balibo* (2009) directed by the Australian Robert Connolly. It is important to note that there is always a danger of underestimating the impact of a cultural artefact, when assessing it whilst the product is still gathering attention, analysis and controversy. At time of writing, *Balibo* (visit <http://www.balibo.com/>) certainly fits into this category since, as yet, it has enjoyed limited distribution globally and has been banned in Indonesia. The latter situation is very much part and parcel of the narrative surrounding *Balibo*. The film has already garnered considerable publicity in Indonesia, Timor-Leste and beyond, much of it because of the banning. This article, therefore, is not so much a detailed review of the film but more a commentary on its impact to date and an interim analysis of how the film and the discussion around it might serve the cause of human rights maintenance in Indonesia and Timor-Leste.

History of Balibo

The title of the film is the name of a small town located 6 kilometres inside the Timor-Leste (East Timor) border from (Indonesian) West Timor. The town of Balibo has become synonymous with the 1975 invasion of the town by the Indonesian military and East Timorese forces loyal to it before occupying the territory of Timor-Leste, and the subsequent killing of six journalists. Amidst Indonesian (and their Western backers’) attempts to hush up the reality of the invasion of Timor-Leste, five journalists from Australia, Britain and New Zealand were tasked to investigate what was happening on the ground. Working for Australia’s Channel 7 and Channel 9, they travelled to Balibo only to meet their fate violently at the hands of incoming Indonesian forces. Subsequently, a sixth journalist, Australian Roger East, was also killed by the Indonesian military whilst endeavouring to set up an East Timor Press Agency.

East, the central character of the film, is played by Anthony LaPaglia, who invested a lot of personal time and initiative in the project.

***Balibo* and its criticisms**

The film, shot in Darwin and Timor-Leste, has been well-received by sympathetic and curious audiences. Moreover, the making, outcome and distribution of the film have enjoyed active support from the families and friends of the murdered journalists, who have been campaigning for truth and justice over what happened in Balibo for thirty-five years. The most prominent critic of the film has been John Pilger, the well-known investigative journalist and author. Pilger is justly renowned and widely praised for his ground breaking and influential documentary film, *Death of a Nation: the Timor Conspiracy* (1994), which brought the brutality of the Indonesian occupation and the suffering of the East Timorese to a global audience. For Pilger, *Balibo* fails to highlight the complicity and cover-up of the Australian government in the Balibo events. It seems some of the film script's earlier versions placed greater emphasis on this aspect prior to editing and revisions of the narrative.

Following a visit to Dili, *Balibo* director Connolly took the view that 'the story of us pursuing 34 years later in detail what was going on in Canberra became less relevant to me in my intention to tell the story of what happened in East Timor to the Timorese' (quoted in Koc, 2009). Pilger describes the film and its claim to be a true story as 'a travesty of omissions' and 'largely fictitious' (Pilger, 2009:10). Unsurprisingly, this viewpoint is not shared by Connolly, the film's producer John Maynard or historical advisor Clinton Fernandes. According to Fernandes:

"The competing demands of accuracy, concision and aesthetics mean that one has to decide in advance what to leave out, what to leave in, and how to re-enact certain events...We made some creative changes to get the best out of the unique advantage enjoyed by films - their ability to show you 'what it feels like to be there'" (Fernandes, 2009).

Another reviewer finds the film to be 'long on factual fidelity' and sees it rightly as not solely an account of a handful of journalists' deaths, serious enough as that is: 'it spreads its attention wide, to capture the full horror of what happened to East Timor in late 1975' (Byrnes, 2009). Indeed, 1975 was just the beginning of a quarter-century of brutal rule for the people of Timor-Leste and Balibo became a symbol of this reality.

Balibo is not a totally accurate reflection of the real situation. For instance, the character and on-screen movements of Roger East are re-imagined somewhat, as are the movement and location of some of the other characters and happenings. Notwithstanding Pilger's critique, it is questionable whether such examples of directorial *dirigisme* and *auteurship* detract from the film's overall thrust, integrity and sincerity. According to one reviewer, Bruce Honeywell:

“While honed to a partly fictional narrative to meet market expectations, the accounts of the deaths of the journalists and crew are chillingly accurate to the eyewitness accounts” (Honeywell, 2010).

Whatever the verdict on its accuracy, the film does not stand alone as an interpretation of the events that took place at the dawn of the Indonesian occupation of Timor-Leste. The film is based on the veteran Australian journalist Jill Jolliffe's book *Cover Up* (republished recently as *Balibo*), whilst other authors such as Tony Maniaty (2009) and Peter Cronau (2010) have covered various aspects of the occupation as well. What unites all the interpretations is an evidence-based conviction that the official version of events maintained by the Indonesian authorities and accepted or colluded in by other countries is not the reality of the events in Balibo in 1975 (Robinson, 2010). Indeed, as Balibo refused, or was not allowed, to 'go away', the quest for truth recovery and justice has continued.

Demand for truth

For reasons of space, this article cannot examine the official enquiries, nor do justice to all the campaigning and other efforts to uncover the truth about Balibo. Significantly, such campaigning, lobbying, and re-visiting have proliferated even in recent times. For instance in Timor-Leste, The Report of the Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation (CAVR) in 2005 urged 'the governments of Australia, Britain and New Zealand [to] undertake a joint initiative to establish the truth about the deaths of six foreign journalists in Timor-Leste in 1975 so that the facts and accountability are finally established' (CAVR, 2005:159; Jolliffe, 2001; 2009; Dowson, 2005; Fernandes, 2004; Leadbeater, 2006; Robinson, 2009; Hainsworth, 2010). In 2007, in one of the case's most significant developments, an Australian New South Wales (NSW) coronial inquest found that the journalists had been killed deliberately by Indonesian military forces to cover up the invasion, rather than caught in

crossfire between rival East Timorese factions or executed by ‘rogue elements’, as originally claimed by Indonesia. In response to the NSW inquest, the Australian Federal Police (AFP) in September 2009 announced a further investigation into the Balibo killings with the Indonesian Special Forces (*Kopassus*) as the prime suspects. The Indonesian government has refused to cooperate with the investigation on the grounds that the case was closed and could be detrimental to bilateral relations.

The making, screening and banning of the film has arguably added to the pressure both at home and abroad for truth recovery and human rights maintenance in Indonesia and Timor-Leste. To date, in 2009 and 2010, the film has been screened in several countries including Australia, Britain, New Zealand, Timor-Leste, etc., at prominent international and human rights film festivals in London (twice), Melbourne, Palm Springs, Pusan, Santa Barbara, Toronto and Wellington. At screenings presented by international organisations such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, those involved with the making of the film and Timorese spokespersons and people, family members of the Balibo victims, campaigning organisations and others have participated in question and answer sessions, and panels. In Timor-Leste, dubbed into the local Tetun language, the film enjoyed a week of screenings in the country’s capital, Dili, the scene of part of the film’s trajectory. At a special event in Dili, President José Ramos-Horta, a central figure in the film (played by Oscar Isaac), awarded the director and producer with the Presidential Medal of Merit for the film’s contribution to the country’s history and memory.

Subsequently, some re-branding of the film title has taken place – from *Balibo* to *The Balibo Conspiracy* – in order to make it more attractive to an audience in the USA and elsewhere.

International effects of *Balibo*

Appropriately it is within Indonesia itself that the film has had a significant and specific impact. At time of writing, the film has not been screened officially in Indonesia, the country, or rather the regime, at the heart of the film’s narrative.

Despite some signs of the post-Suharto regime(s) opening up, the authorities have not been receptive to allowing the Jakarta International Film Festival to screen the film to the general public. The banning decision of the Indonesian Film Censorship Agency in effect gives further substance to the stated position of the Indonesian regime that Balibo is finished business.

However, the proscription of the film has opened up a hornet's nest of discontent and civil society opposition. In particular, the Alliance of Indonesian Journalists (AJI) contested the censor's ruling and prepared to challenge it in the courts. In early March 2010, the Jakarta chapter of the AJI filed a lawsuit against the censor, just a week or so before Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's state visit to Australia. In addition, following the ban, bootleg copies and screenings proliferated in the Indonesian capital. The *Jakarta Globe* reported on 14 December 2009 that the ban had encouraged various arts organisations and journalist groups, including the AJI and the Jakarta Foreign Correspondents' Club, to arrange private screenings for thousands of filmgoers. Shopkeepers reported high demand for pirated copies of the film. Clearly the banning backfired as the film attracted a growing interest and curiosity precisely because of the ban. Also in December 2009, a retired Indonesian army colonel, Gatot Purwanto, appeared to shed further light on Balibo by contradicting the official line that the journalists had been killed in the crossfire. Purwanto's interview in *Tempo Magazine* is perhaps the most important of the three occasions so far, with senior Indonesian military participants in the Balibo saga trying to undermine the official version of what happened in 1975.

With the scheduled showing of the film at the Human Rights Watch (HRW)'s Film Festival in London in March 2010, the organisation's Deputy Asia Director, Elaine Pearson, called upon the Indonesian government to rescind the censoring of the film:

“The Indonesian government should be protecting free expression, not censoring controversial films. *Balibo* may very well provoke public debate about the military's past actions, but the Indonesian government shouldn't be afraid of that discussion. Instead of spending its time trying to airbrush from history what had happened in East Timor, the Indonesian government should keep its promise to hold those who committed horrendous abuses, such as the killing of these six journalists, accountable” (Human Rights Watch, 2009).

In a press release, HRW also noted that representatives of several Indonesian government bodies, including the official spokesmen for the armed forces and both the Defence and Foreign Affairs ministries had welcomed the censorship as a measure to preserve the country's image and diplomatic standing abroad. Clearly, as the *Balibo* 'story' illustrates, the Indonesian regime is not comfortable with past human rights abuses being re-visited. But, by the

same token, the democratic maturity of the Indonesia regime will be measured at home and abroad.

Conclusion

From a development education perspective, what are the summary lessons of the above analysis? First, the issues of truth, justice and human rights surrounding Balibo persist. Despite the events taking place thirty-five years ago, the call for redress remains strong and constant, and the screening or non-screening of Robert Connolly's film makes an impact here. Second, as the narrative and truth about Balibo reaches ever wider audiences, the international dimensions of the tragedy, present from the beginning, become more and more apparent. In this respect, terms such as 'cover-up' and 'conspiracy' will probably be used increasingly. Third, awareness raising and active learning about Balibo and the issues surrounding it have helped to promote an understanding of what happened and why it happened in 1975. Again, the film and its screenings - organised around relatives' participation, the film-makers/actors' key-note inputs and various panels, question and answer sessions and the like - have played a role here. Fourth, with increased international coverage, the role of Kopassus in Balibo and beyond has become more understood and criticised, an important consideration as many organisations and individuals are currently lobbying the Obama administration to oppose any cooperation with or assistance to the Indonesian Special Forces (ETAN, 2010). Fifth, the director of *Balibo* also has used the film as an opportunity to highlight the dangerous situations that many investigative journalists have been exposed around the world. To sum up, the educational process and engagement bound up with the *Balibo* narrative can serve to foster an ongoing demand for justice, solidarity and human rights at home and abroad. In this context, it is not surprising that Jakarta-based journalists and media-focused organisations held screenings of the film markedly for educational reasons.

Note: In completing the above article, the author would like to acknowledge the advice and information provided by Hugh Dowson, who of course has no responsibility for the final product.

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