TRAVEL, WRITING, AND POPULAR CULTURE IN 21st CENTURY INDONESIA

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Abstract

This paper aims to elaborate the phenomena of travel as popular culture in publications; books, movies, television, and social media. As travel becomes an important means to contemporary society, the efforts of documenting and representing travel experience becomes vital and massive. Numerous publications of travel-themed books, movies, television shows, and social media posts indicate that travel has become certain popular theme and style for Indonesians. By focusing the discussion on the concept of travel writing and its usage on popular media, this research indicates that travel books, movies, and television shows produced by the author/director are used to awaken Indonesians awareness toward travel. The 21st century travel writing is mostly influenced by modern sensibility which tends romanticize the travelogues. The widespread of romantic representation in popular media creates a popular myth about the journey and travel destination. Moreover, the social media involvement facilitates the production of myth by engaging the user into the voluntary (re)production of travel discourse and its myth.

Keywords: travel, popular culture, Indonesia, myth, 21st century

1. INTRODUCTION

The Visit Indonesia program in 1991 initiated the government mission on developing travel and tourism. Yet, the flourishing results appears in the 21st century along with the advance publication technology which enable the faster, wider, and deeper reach. The popular culture endorsement on travel industry plays very significant role in indoctrinating and creating Indonesians awareness toward travel. There are hundreds of travel-themed publications in various form; book, movie, television, and internet content.

In the turn of the millennia, the discourses about travel are flooding the popular—mass—media. Numerous television show broadcast, books, movie, advertising, and the internet and social media post have endorsed and positions travel as an important part in popular culture. Moreover, the spread of travel discourses is facilitated by the inclusive of production and consumption in social media. Miller (2017) stated that there are 80 million photos posted in Instagram each day and

********** Visit Indonesia Year program has been launched in 1991 to promote Indonesian tourism with different theme every year. In 2008, the name changed into Wonderful Indonesia and has spread the word not only to local audience but also to people throughout the world.

††††††††††††† In bookshops around Indonesia, travel publication even has its own section. There are hundreds of books ranged from fiction, documentary, autobiography, biography, and travel tips.
most of them are about travel. As the most produced and consumed source of travel information, social media posts indicate users' attitude toward travel. Social media helps to positions travel into as vital part of popular culture.

Those phenomena above highlight the role of popular media in shaping and enriching travel culture. As popular culture massively produced†‡‡‡‡‡‡ and creates flood of information, it becomes an effective medium for mass brainwash. Considering powerful function and role of popular media as a form of travel writing§§§§§§§§§, this research aims to elaborate the relation between travel discourses represented in the 21st century Indonesian popular media; books, movies, and the attitudes toward travel in social media.

2. TRAVEL AND POPULAR DISCOURSE

In the first decade of the 21st century, the early appearance of travel publication might be the Jelajah (started in 2001) and Si Bolang (started in 2003) in TransTV, the private television company. Now, there are more than 20 travelling shows broadcasted almost every day such as My Trip My Adventure, Jejak Petualang, Si Bolang, Indonesia Bagus, Jalan-Jalan Men, Mancing Mania, 100 Hari Keliling Indonesia, and others********. Other significant publication might be the book Laskar Pelangi by Andrea Hirata and 5cm by Donny Dhirgantoro in 2005. 5cm has not given much attention until its adaptation into movie in 2012 while Laskar Pelangi successfully set the country mood by giving powerful insight of low-class people struggle of pursuing higher education to Sorbonne, Paris and dream to wander around Europe.

The second decade of the millennia shows vast improvement of travel themed publication ranged from books, movies, television shows, and internet and social media post. The adaptation of Laskar Pelangi along with mass media endorse on it has attracted more attention from public†††††. In the same year, 5cm movie received far and wider attention from the audience and bombarded Indonesians with the spirit of adventure. Inspired by the movie, thousands of visitors decided to climb Semeru mountain‡‡‡‡‡‡‡‡‡‡‡. It was later followed by the broadcast of television shows about adventure throughout exotic places. Afridayanti (2017), Khanafi (2017), and Masie et al (2017) states that My Trip My Adventure—one of the adventure television show—has significant role in motivating and inspiring Indonesians to travel. This show has even succeeded to

†‡‡‡‡‡‡‡‡‡‡‡‡‡‡ Storey (2009) relates its relation to mass culture
§§§§§§§§§§§§§ Thompson (2011) states that travel writing might not be limited into written narrative, but also any form of writing including photograph, movie, etc.
******** data compiled from television broadcast schedule and tv show list (Juwana, 2015)
‡‡‡‡‡‡‡‡‡‡‡‡‡‡ Indonesian media popularize the movie by exposing many news coverage and highlighting the news that President of Indonesia recommended the movie and even invited group of students and children to watch the movie together https://www.jpnn.com/news/bei-stop-transaksi-sby-nonton-laskar-pelangi
‡‡‡‡‡‡‡‡‡‡‡‡‡‡ Number of visitors to semeru dramatically increased to almost three times before the movie was released. The number keep increasing in the following months. Abdi Purmono, 2013. Source: https://gaya.tempo.co/read/463203/gara-gara-5-cm-pendaki-ke-semeru-melonjak-drastis
create local community in 80 regions in Indonesia. Besides, there is also emergence of various motives on travel culture. After the long domination of Western and exotic destination travelogues, the religious discourse started to take role in travel themed publication. There are various theme of book and movie; religious travel or pilgrimage, adventure, and exotic encounters, and even love story in foreign or exotic land. 99 Cahaya di Langit Eropa (2012) by Rangga Salsabila and Hanum Almahendra and Haji Backpacker (2014) by Aguk Irawan might be the pioneer of religious themed travel book. The publication and adaptation of this book into movie then risen Indonesian awareness of travel for of religious mission.

In the internet age, social media is a powerful medium to spread the travel culture. 64% of those who have seen travel posts on social media feels encouraged to travel. Instagram—with 59 billion users in Indonesia—is one of the most favorite and popular media to share travel experience. Massive of travel posts becomes the web of travel discourse while it also indicates users' attitude toward travel.

3. THE MYTH OF POPULAR TRAVEL DISCOURSE

Travel writing participates the creation of myth with its ideological, cultural, and political motivation. Barthes (1972: 128) states that myth is a type of speech. It consists of modes of writing or of representations; not only written discourse, but also photography, cinema, movie, shows, etc. As in travel writing, Thompson (2011: 69) states that travel writer needs to address at certain mood and sensibility to amaze and persuade the reader. This tendency has been performed by latest travel publications mentioned above. In globalized and open world, objective reportage will be just a 'plain' documentation. Contemporary travel writer tends to 'escape' this challenges by providing more specific personal perspective which also personify the 'ideal' image of the journey.

In Laskar Pelangi, rather than directly portraying the 'sophisticated' Europe, the writer exposes more in the inner struggle and the conflict of Ikal, the main character. In 5cm, the conquer of Semeru is glorified from the point of view of urban characters emphasizing the encounter of two totally different culture. The religious travel in 99 Cahaya di Langit Eropa emphasizes more on the challenges, dynamic changes, also battles and thought within the authors' mind. Haji Backpacker has also the same tendency of exposing character's sensibility on the journey. Travel writing projects author's desired representation which might become

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*** In 2017, there are more than 2,000 local members of My Trip My Adventure (MTMA) community. https://www.cnnindonesia.com/gaya-hidup/20170831145916-307-238652/komunitas-my-trip-my-adventure-jadi-andalan-kemenpar

*************** Data obtained from https://aytm.com/blog/social-travel-survey/


………………… Maslihatin (2015)

………………… (Purwaningsih, 2015)
the myth. However, as Barthes (1972) suggest, the myth does not tell lies, it works to distort audience attention into the preferred, romanticized—and somehow fictionalized representation.

The myth in travel is also a result of its hyperbolic and exaggerated description and its fictional quality. Even the reader has already realized this potential, yet they consider it as the real objective depiction. In 5cm movie, even they are aware that the climb to Semeru Mountain might be difficult and tough, the romanticized depiction has created a myth—that they would prefer to believe—of good adventure, companionship, and conquer. Moreover, to satisfy the popular expectation, the movie adaptation shows glamorous, beautiful, handsome, and well dressed and made-up character even after a very long and hard climb. Such imageries do not only appear in this movie, but also in its poster, and television shows. This fallacy—which is demanded by popular media—created a myth of beautiful and easy mountain climbing.

Most of Indonesian television shows also has this tendency. Bringing the spirit of reality show, these shows display the staged 'simulation' of travel journey. The encounter with another culture is staged into less dangerous in well-structured plot. Worse, the production often staged the local ceremony, costumes, and activities based on the plot demand. It depicts the 'best preferred'—fabricated—image. They even endorsed a public figure, entertainer, or comedian to 'dramatize' the two different cultural encounters. Moreover, to satisfy the popular expectation, it often highlights the 'modern' in clash with a very 'primitive' destination.

TV industry takes further step to promote travel culture by focusing on specific audience. Television shows such as Para Petualang Cantik, Hijab Traveler, and Alenia’s Journey Uncover Papua, Girls Diary are exposing woman traveler. These shows have double function; to attract male viewers by showing a beautiful woman on travel while also encouraging women to travel. Recently, television started to broadcast My Trip My Adventure Kids which exposed children traveler. This is the effort of involving travel culture at the early age. Audience might see this as liberation without realizing the popular media agenda which positions the audience—as men and women also children—as the consumer of travel product.

In the age of late capitalism, any cultural product—book, movie, and television shows—are transformed into commodified products which function as a subtle indoctrination to consume other products. Dozens of sponsorships and endorsements were supporting the mission. Storey (2009) states that popular culture is the collective fantasy of the society and it is articulated in form of disguise. It works to satisfy the audience by providing the desired image and fulfilling audience expectation in the benefit of capitalism. In this case, the myth obscures the authentic and provides

*************** Graham & Huggan (via Thompson: 2011) explained travel writing as the 'fiction of factual representation' to explain its ambiguous position between reality and fictional narrative.

††††††††††††††† Onishi, Norimitsu states that since 2009 Indonesian has embraced American-Style Reality TV. https://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/23/world/asia/23indo.html

‡‡‡‡‡‡‡‡‡‡‡‡‡‡‡‡ Indonesian travel themed TV shows, such as Celebrity on Vacation, Comedy Traveler, Weekend List,
more 'satisfying' experience. At the same time, it draws audience attention away from the fundamental desire to knowledge the encounter into something more entertaining, more marketable—or more popularly consumed.

4. THE VOLUNTARY (RE)PRODUCTION OF POPULAR MYTH

Everyone is a travel writer now. Nowadays, everybody has the urge to share their travel experience in social media. Social media democratize the (re)production of the discourse. It is not—exclusively—by certain author or producers, but is— inclusively—created and consumed by its user. However, the inclusiveness barely creates new different discourse of travel. It seems to mimic and becomes the extension of the previous discourse. The post about the journey to any destination also has the tendency to romanticize, exaggerate, and fictionalize. Moreover, social media can urge people to participate in popular rite, sharing travel experience and post the best travel images voluntarily. This mechanism leads to the massive (re)production and massive consumption of myth. Social media functions not only as a sharing medium, but it also offers the pleasure of attention which motivates its users to work voluntarily.

On Instagram, the massive post can be accessed through hashtag. There are 6,913,581 posts of #exploreindonesia, 3,585,883 posts of #explorejogja, 1,412,146 posts of #explorejakarta, #1,793,883 posts of #exploremalang, #2,534,607 posts of #explorebali, 1,026,160 posts of #explorebali, and other popular destination . Popularly used, Instagram demands people to upload and post their best image or photograph. Here, our society is demanded to have certain appetizer for photograph—the need to consume image. Photography serves as a proof of existence in certain destination. Sontag (1973: 6) states that it gives imaginary feeling of possessing something and it develops strongly together with tourism since it offers the feeling of possessing the experience of travel. This positions photography—next to travel—as the most significant part of popular culture.

The power of photograph is that it provides the most vivid 'realistic' portrayal of a destination. The consumption of images causes the audience—as the potential traveler—to expect for a beautiful and exotic destination. The nature of photography facilitates this (re)production of myth by portraying providing a captured 'fixed' image of beautiful destination. The myth on popular culture—for example in travel destination image—creates what Lisle (2006: 216) mentions as utopian fantasy, an expected image. In Instagram posts, the #ranukumbolo mostly shows beautiful sunrise with thick fog, green trees and leaves, in shady and yellowish ray of light. These photographs are still and fixed, but the reality changes. Millisecond of captured and cropped

Wendt (2014: 31) argues that as a form of metadata, the hashtag (#) on Instagram is a tool that allows people to assign words or short phrases to their images and browse for other images.

The data is obtained from the Instagram search on September 25th, 2018. These number of hashtag is still rapidly increased every day.

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moment in the past seems to generalize the forever condition and create myth which is believed to be always in present. Once they reach the destination, they might be confronted with the present-reality that the destination is not as expected—the melancholia.

As one of the most popularly practiced culture, photography becomes what Richard Maltby (via Storey, 2009) mentions as ‘escapism that is not an escape from or to anywhere, but an escape of our utopian selves’. Photography feature—cropping, freezing moment, and most importantly photo filters—enables them to negotiate the melancholia, by creating an ideal desired image of themselves and the destination. Thus, the image consumption results from the need to escape also encouraged by social media popularity. The trick of such mechanism is that the traveler is voluntarily motivated to create the best possible images and self-representation which often favoring the popular myth. They are no longer concern about the objective destination, but the self, presented image of self. Therefore, the prevailing myth is kept safe, undisturbed. The cycle will be repeated and keep (re)producing and securing myth of a destination, voluntarily.

In most cases, many public figure and Instagram influencer are paid to promote certain brand. The (re)production of the myth significantly endorsed the fast-growing consumerism. Realizing the potential, travel business owners take the opportunity by endorsed public figure and/or Instagram celebrity to promote their travel product/service. The engagement between travel industry and the influencer result the effective brainwash of social media users. Thompson (2011) argues that travel wiring—or discourse—might works as an endorse to tourism industry. Such collaboration between the feature of popular media, public figure, and the romanticized travel discourse participate to create what John Urry called as ‘the tourist gaze’. The freedom of mobility, movement, and travel is not 'innocent' since the spirit has been infiltrated by the capitalist agenda. In the other hand, the myth in travel discourse—which support the popular myth—are creating the myth of free movement that you are free to go anywhere, everywhere, while in fact you are engaged and dependent from the virtual and real world of consumerism.

CONCLUSION

Travel discourses and its myth in the 21st century Indonesia have been motivated and developed in diverse way. As this study has suggest, it begins with the popularization of education, adventure, and religious motive through popular media such as book, movie, and television series. The development in the second decade has shown rapid increase along with the support of technology and social media with its very powerful, fast, and wide reach. The (re)production of myth in social media and its un-ending cycle—of melancholia and utopia—distort them away from authentic experience. They consume a fabricated image, get disappointed, yet still managed to

††††††††††††††††† The mourn caused by clash between the utopian fantasy and the present reality Lisle (2006: 2016)
‡‡‡‡‡‡‡‡‡‡‡‡‡‡‡‡‡ (via Thompson, 2011)
contribute the (re)production of popular myth. This shows how popular culture works at its effective potential, the manifestation of value and attitude.

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