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## Malaysia

Garin Nugroho's quest for beauty

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## The Ascension of a Photo-poet: Garin Nugroho's Quest for Beauty

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*This essay is part of the four poles of a meta-philosophical approach towards apprehending the films of acclaimed Indonesian film director Garin Nugroho as photo-poetry and himself, the photo-poet. It is the child of the first two poles being: Creation from Light and For All Time. The ascension of a photo-poet depicts his metaphysical journey into several realms, known and unknown as seen through the eye of the heart of the writer. It is through this journey that he captures, recaptures, discovers and rediscovers. This infinity of toiling, mingling and meditating process is the conditioning of his experiential quest into his' poesis,' an act of creation that makes him a photo-poet, rejuvenated at every moment in time.*

### Introduction

Art is born and takes hold wherever there is a timeless and insatiable longing for the spiritual.

(Andrei Tarkovsky, 1987)

The world of the photo-poet as an artist is entangled with the challenges of his spiritual<sup>1</sup> ascension of the manifest. Tarkovsky's views seemed to befit this world ([www.kirjasto.sci.fi/tarkov.htm](http://www.kirjasto.sci.fi/tarkov.htm)). To him: "... healing occurs through a spiritual crisis." By the virtue of the ones engaged upon a profound journey, the world of the photo-poet sees images as a signification of the membrane, a colossus of events in their nerves that transpires the momentary engulfment of its meaning, subdued and forgotten by the spectators but is an imprint in the sincere heart of the photo-poet. Garin in his *Leaf on a Pillow* describes the children shown as not only a manifestation of a report, or observation, but also a depiction of how they support one another in their own way and how they do not ignore their own process of moral formation (Sato, 2004, p. 89). The

ephemerality of a *leaf*, its short life span seems to point to the lives of the future generation, wilting away in the winds of uncertainty and how vulnerable the leaf is for it could be swayed, burnt and dissolve into the air without even being noticed. Existence to Garin seemed to be pointless without salvation and the spirit has to be communed towards recognizing the real. This, to Shklovsky (1917), is first and foremost a special way of thinking and knowing with images that determines it to be a piece of artwork for without it, poetry will cease to exist.

## **The First Ascension**

The photo-poet's vision is personalized. It is a vision that sees and senses *realities after realities*. *The reality of truth, the reality of falsity and the 'face' that makes it complete*. Rainsford (2007) in discussing this poetic approach sees Tarkovsky's poetic films as "disclosing a face that should be the 'real' one and which surprises and disconcerts and even frightens through its revelation of our earlier misapprehension, but which would be folly to think of as the end of misapprehension and the return of unambiguous presence. Yet, the contrary energy of poetry and symbol does not perfect a good world; it comments desperately on a bad world, enclosed and oppressive" (Dillon, 2006).

Such exclamation does not bring joy to the director. Joyousness and happiness is far from reachable as photo-poets strive to dismantle each journey in time as a pure duration of the cosmos. The value it brings does not disengage himself from the subject at hand but rather an inclination of the penumbra of thoughts that stills the heart each time he encounters the revelation before him. There seemed to be a kind of freedom in thought (idea) that signifies the free will (creation) of the human and much more those of the photo-poets. This freedom in thought lies in the world of Garin where the innocent prisoners are given the avenue to present their case, their voices to be heard, their sufferings to be shared. Garin showcases the lives that seemed alien to development and perhaps unworthy to be heard of by his government; that of the street urchins. He elevates the need for love of a child in *Lewa* and the humanly sense of belonging to a nation (Sumba). How this is embraced is a mission, a conscious mission that he belongs to the people yet is separated from it but coexist in the creation of God. The duty performed upon which is the diameter of the value it persist. The world of the photo-poet does not just embrace, it breathes the art-form of the human

mind, act and thought into a singularity that enhances even deeper the interpretation of existence. In *Leaf on a Pillow*, Garin deconstructs realism in hyper-realist irrational impacts. He returns to realism but resorts to it in its new interpretation. Perhaps this is a similar formula adopted by Tarkovsky; he strived to reproduce everything the way it was, to literally repeat what was fixed in his memory...the result turned to be very strange...it was to him a singular experience (Rainsford, 2007).

To be a poet that transcends the photography (snapshots) of events around him is an obligation he imposes upon himself. It is a kind of knowledge, close to Kant's theory of knowledge that is concerned with the possibility of knowledge itself, not occupied with objects but with the way that we can possibly know objects even before we experience them which transcends our own consciousness. No longer is the self separated from the environment around him but it is in tune, up till its minutest revelation. Due or undue, worthy or not, these images are processed through and through as a succession of images that can be retrieved any time the photo-poet pleases. Such tremor is found in the lives of the photo-poet as they achieve a grand design of God in their works. Those that surpass the physical realm into a realist art that truly gives recognition upon the Maker, God. It thrives upon frontality, a sacred art, engaging upon the manifest as a clear revelation of creation (Adams, 2005). Throughout history, this is also expressed as the Holy in art that is found in the films of Yasujiro Ozu, Robert Bresson, Carl Dreyer and Andrei Tarkovsky. Bresson's creation for instance is in the instance of feelings and not the images.

We find a similar approach in Garin's work. In *The Poet* Garin expresses the whole thing in a dance covered with emotion of the same intensity, sharing the plight exposed in the films. This can be seen in the songs by the women prisoners in *The Poet*. The slow dance and songs of the woman missing her child, embracing a kind of pillow in absence of the one she loved. This continues as she begged the guard to put her on the death list as she could not bear living without the one she loved. This realisation will merge into the rhythm of the dance (Sato, 2004). To this, Garin bears the seal of the saint as referred to by Bazin, even if he is disowned. Garin sees no fear in painting the sufferings and destinies of the oppressors and the oppressed. The lives that perhaps to his own nation of millions, seemed insignificant that to every death as in *The Poet*, a life is disposed, a sacred life, a voice of death crying out to be enjoined in the eternity of life; God's.

Wear and tear, these photo-poets are not interested in the prize, it is himself that he is concerned, much to the astonishment of himself. Garin empties himself like in Zen, taking the tragedy of his nation as a means of creation. His creation is a strategic resistance against what he term as “a government that ignores the law.” He does not believe in revolution but expands the idea of doing something revolutionary bringing sensitive themes to his film such as religion, race and sex. To him, truth and strategy is inseparable if given the proper treatment (Ishizaka, 2004, p. 108).

## **The Second**

Through and through, the fine-print of the photo-poet’s book is edited. Some works repeats itself, some, maintains its status quo and others just exist as it is, without any ties binding. Going against or for the values in the spectator is not of the essence as photo-poets dances and lyrically writes his spoken words and unspoken insights into the images that is intertwined into a collective whole. Tying in with Tarkovsky’s views:

An artist after all is an individual, a personality; he is like a nation’s personification because he turns out to be the nations and product. Sometimes that nation people and society do not even accept this artist. Sometimes they chase him away. They comprehend him only many, many years later. An artist’s role is to be a voice of his people- not even “to be”, one cannot “be”, one cannot tell oneself to “be” a nation’s voice – one simply is.

Only one of Garin’s films (*Leaf on a Pillow*) made it to Indonesian cinema. The rest was ironically acclaimed abroad collecting 23 international citations for his five feature films (Seno Gumira Ajidarma, 2004, p. 59). Disturbed as he may be, he continues his circuit of creation taking in the images before him as guide. Garin has put his experiences along the road of liberalisation (Bambang Sugiharto, 2004, p. 193). His power is in his sensitivity and acute observation of various significant phenomena in his society particularly in terms of raising the dimension of expression and the aspects of concrete experiences of democracy (ibid).

There is no separation or doubt as to the choice he has made and thus the images become him. The images of the dead, the alive, the sad, the joy and so much more of the ever-living are sewn into the breath of the photo-poets. Garin is not concerned about what others

feel or think as it is the work of his unique art that stands before him, the art of living, a mirror, reflecting on the processes he has undergone and those that he has empathised; as the mobile image of immobile eternity. Says Garin (Ishizaka, 2004, p. 113), "My films are my method to let people know that this is my work. This is how I view things." The unseen is seen before their own image and the nodes and overtures of its gigantic frown lies awake even in dreaming. How this is so is a mystery that only the world of the photo-poet can comprehend for they are in a new world, theirs. To Tarkovsky (Rainsford, 2007), cinema is based on two types of directors who make two different types of films: those who imitate the world they live in, and those who create their own world – the poets in cinema. The poetic creation of Garin's world can be seen in his *Letter to an Angel*. Garin tries to capture the richness of his local culture using a more improvisatory style of direction (Hoskins, 2004, p. 131). He reenacts this by living in the local area, researching its styles of play, body movement and entertainment. He combines footages of a Sumbanese funeral with the murder of *Berlian Merah's* husband. He wanted their acting to become part of the geography, of the ways of tending a livestock, making a living even building a house (ibid). Lewa's use of the locally fashioned bamboo as an object of power is shown by Garin to have little use for the traditional priests or diviners (ibid).

Garin's works too are predominantly found in the transcendental style of filmmaking. Transcendental style seeks to maximise the mystery of existence, it eschews all conventional interpretations of reality (Adams, 2003). The mystery of existence by means of transcendental style by Garin is presented herewith. The photo-poet chooses irrationalism over rationalism. As in *Leaf on a Pillow*, the lives of the street urchins were unbearable as they are seen eating without using their hands, licking the remnants on their plates, just like dogs; an alienation to civilisation. Garin thrives repetition over variation as in *The Poet*, the fear of the prisoner's each time names are being called; a repetitive reminder of death that could come at any moment. Garin chooses sacred over profane, raising the function of angels as a means of reaching and finding salvation in God in *Letter to an Angel*. He thrives upon tradition over experiment; questioning his anarchic governance and rekindling its powers in the Didong in *The Poet*. He, in embracing the struggles, tradition, nature and God is on the road to anonymity and humility, a mode he chooses over individualization.

## **The Third**

Garin's films speak of the hearts of the people in remote places, some bears testimony to the subject before them, close yet unseen. Hopes of these stories are the circumference of the gateway he hums, dances, lyricise and in harmony, it transcends beyond what is natural, what is real. The rituals of death in *Letter to an Angel*, the life of the street urchins and the sacrificial turmoil in *The Poet* are all irrational parts of the human system. There is a sense of two-dimensional, the primitive (originality) in art that Garin dissolves himself into. This, he repeats in images after images to provoke intellectual realism; the image of thought. Yet in all, it is tradition that Garin holds on to, the tradition such as those in the Didong in *The Poet*, the maternal Gaia in *Leaf on a Pillow* and the tradition of a sense of belonging to a greater nation in *Letter to an Angel*. Independence and modernity as well as the core of his developing multi-ethnic nation are seen in unison, a multiplicity of the role of man in trying to comprehend this art of living.

The very light he engages upon are not of one but many and these lights bears truth to its comprehension of the whole systems of being and presumably, a continuous whole<sup>2</sup>, repeated and repeated over a period of non-time and thus a new time is born, a new beginning is formed out of the fetus of the photo-poets in the mysteries of existence he exposes, a kind of karma he ascends, an affirmation of the real; a transcendence to the point of absence (Levinas, 1996). To Tarkovsky (Rainsford, 2007); "Whenever an artist sort of dissolves himself in a work of art, when he himself disappears without a trace, this then is unbelievably, poetry." Dovzhenko often considered his own films in poetic terms. In his autobiography (Dillon, 2007), Dovzhenko writes; "The few films I did complete, I made with love and sincerity. In these films lies the primary meaning of my life. They are meant to be poetic films, and contemporary life, with the common man at its center, is their chief subject." Far from the reachables, these images blends the current and speeds through the future and back into its past. In pastness there is presentness and the future seemed to be stilled, waiting to arrive at its motion as the story unfolds and triple folds onto the screen of symbolic life depicted by the photo-poets. To Garin (Trimarsanto & Rahzen, 2004):

Man is homo simbolicum. He always lives in the abundance of communications by way of symbols. He lives and gets his sustenance through symbols which cause restlessness and provide him with

vitality to indict and question his surroundings. Alienation is energy capable of producing continuous orbits of creation for a creator so that he can communicate with his world with various perspectives, in the form of either an indictment or joyfulness.

This is an uneasy adventure for Garin; a chaotic pilgrimage. Garin's *Leaf on a Pillow* is a hyper-realist film that interprets time as a loneliness that suffocates us; a change that takes place without any change (Seno Gumira Ajidarma, 2004). To some, it is an aesthetic obsession. Yet it is not the duty of the photo-poets to arrive into these stations. It is an individual station that thrives upon its beauty, outside of the cosmos of the photo-poet. It is up to the seer into seeing what is unfolding before them. Such is the philosophy of the photo-poets. Such is the depiction that even in silence it speaks of the shapes of the images, the colour and character of its essence. This is the independent film director that Garin sees as, independence itself "... likened to a labyrinth full of never-ending journeys. It stays in between; between financial limitation and an abundance of ideas, between personality and the market, between ideas and so forth. He moves in various swinging movements full of opposites in the extent of the major acrobatics of creation. He is a professional fully understanding the scale of tension, understanding the meaning of falling when doing a difficult acrobatic movement" (Trimarsanto & Rahzen, 2004).

## **The Fourth**

Enjoined in this is the intrinsic virtue of the director that moves beyond auteur Garin's films are unpredictable with varying time-scape but thriving in human salvation, he does not reconstruct sets but enhances the natural setting. To each poem that is photographed, a life is given, a renewed life of the images once seen but is derived out of each a new beginning into levels of interpretation and awareness. Such close depiction of the work of God, where we are told to read and affirm and in this context a line of attack and defence is seen. Either an acceptance or a defiant mood is created, seemingly to find a purpose as to the results that are to conjoin in it. Greatness lies in smallness and in smallness lies greatness of the works of the photo-poets. Grinding in the essence of the frame that binds it, it tries to extend itself into the frames of his cosmos, those that has several boundaries and is permissioned to traverse beyond and back.



blackish and whitish. The formula of living in motion on his screen is a private one, devoid of any disturbances of the outer, even if it is derived from the outer. The images may not necessarily be in sync with its past image, the images that may disrupt yet flows in congruence with the outdoors and the indoors, the sounds that backs it up as a whole orchestra of feelings and emotions tied in *medias res*<sup>3</sup> and in affluent brink of realization, the photo-poet submits.

Such is the greatness of the revelation of the Creation and its being and non being. Such is the deformity and perfection of the images they see before them that is sculpted into a treasure chest waiting to be unfold in their coming works. Garin's *Birdmen's Tale* (2002) discusses moments of "loving the other" and in this sense, of other religions; not a popular theme in Indonesian cinema. The materiality of succession in these images glorifies life. The essence it tries to unfold is personal. The touch of the photo-poet keeps coming back in their re-known works. These are works that may not be comprehended during their lifetime for they are the futurist. They see what no one sees and this is purely art, the artistic exclamation of their individualist approach towards life and death; those that they are not afraid to tread, those that they welcome in anticipation of its revelations. Those that at moments they deny to be of their own but of God given and that the atoms that bind them into wholeness can be dispersed and annihilated at any point of moment by the creator.

André Bazin saw cinema's harnessing and recreation of life as representative of God's very act of creation (<http://www.reverseshot.com>). The photo-poets realization in this context is manifold. It does not stop at one moment in time but is pursued in timeless moments just like the films of Dryer, Dovzhenko and Tarkovsky. The photo-poets is in actual fact is always upon creation and there is no wrong or right to their creation. There is no rule binding their works for it is a mirror image of the Creator. It is an exclamation of the Creator upon Himself that only has the photo-poet tremble in creation of its greatness. It is thus by far a grand design<sup>4</sup> the photo-poets see as he smiles upon his discovery.

## **The Sixth**

In the life of the photo-poet, the inner is intertwined with the outer. The motherland is part of the nation, the people. Much of the structure of the photo-poets ambit is entrapment and helplessness. In *The Poet*, Garin becomes a single warrior, fighting the anarchic army of Suharto,

virtually. This is a paradox as he, in fighting is also saddened and frustrated by the helplessness of the prisoners. There seemed to be no avenue to fight and that the only to do so is to revolutionise through his images by means of empathy. This is a melancholic drink he sips into bit by bit. The ravaged and desolate inner wasteland churns out the cup of infinite dreams he constructs upon his cinematic world. The inner self of Garin has spoken in silence (images). In Garin's renderings, a paradox is constructed, one that fulfills his thirst for beauty, truth and its essence. This is in tune with Bresson's films that to Doebler (2007) "... are profound because what i am trying to do, again, is get at something deeper than just a photographic reproduction of nature; it was the heart, or one could say truth, of nature. As Bresson commented, "I am looking for truth or the impression of truth."

The idealization of a normal life as embraced by the mass with the cinema is a unison, a becoming element that is almost plague-like that addicts the spectators over its images. This bleak and austere approach by Garin upholds the very idea of contemplation and meditation that Garin wishes to invoke in his awakenings, projected onto the screen. Here, he resides at the peak of his discovery in assimilation of his states of consciousness. He is in constant conversation with nature, perhaps a destructive interaction to popular culture as he creates somewhat a literal imbalance. He then unifies it into confined spaces, the bleak and haunting interplay of light and darkness. All for the picture of reality he has assigned to himself. The disorganization of the psyches, projected into periodic changes in lighting represents the emotional and the physical as in *The Poet*. Garin photographs the reconciliation with the Acehnese's past as his own, a journey he wishes to tread along, bind to, in spirit. A similar reduction of the universe is also seen in *Letter to an Angel* as Garin superimposes a circuitous route, blending Lewa's nomadic existence, his struggles to find peace in a world of uncertain destinies. Here is a case of lost innocence. Garin ravages the conflict of his nation/ child that is still in its infancy, in its totality of barrenness, devoid of its motherland (Indonesia).

Lewa in Garin's *Letter to an Angel*, is one of the Children of a Thousand Islands, children that tries to comprehend the unnatural landscape of war within their own cultures as well as those embraced from the west. There is no plea or delineation as the peasants, pagans, rituals is served as a metaphor of this seemingly human-like cultural acceptance. Garin's appeal is as close as Dovzenko's tribute to 'Earth', their earth as in *Bende Mataram* as the mother, the one that bears the

life of this earth; *Gaia*. The fatherless and motherless boy attempts to reach out the depiction of 'motherhood'. The Madonna poster is a depiction of hope and despair, sculpted by Garin as a definition of our own imperfect lives. The essence of logical order in the film reflects the emotional isolation of Garin, in the artistic experiential journey of the photo-poet in constant creation. His photo-poetry assumes the characteristics of pure cinema. In *Letter to An Angel*, we experience truth in all its beauty and desperate brief connection with the artist himself. Garin is a true-imaginere that engages upon his poems of the creator, imagined or not. His mind is in constant redefinition of his innermost wish; its spiritual longing. He creates and recreates to fulfill this longing that is all in the journey. He treads upon the life of the street urchins, painting the faces and streets with a touch of melancholic mourns of the children, in exile within their own homes. The children in *Letter To An Angel*, in *Leaf on A Pillow*, and the prisoners in *The Poet* are all but Garin's pervasive longing for meaning, setting himself to perform the existential mission.

To read and affirm refines into strings of comprehension that doubles up, just like the *Oud*. As the player strums it, varied tones, sounds and rhythm blends in. This innate longing is highly cerebral and obscure. Reading and translating simply enhances the symbolic revelation of the soul; the quest to unify the unexplored frontiers as *Lewa* in *Letter to an Angel* rides on and into the landmines ahead. As in *The Poet*, a deep and personal statement is made by Garin, a repetitive mode of salvation on humanity's remote and isolated fight for freedom in captivity; a sacrifice. This ties in with the 'Marapu' procession in *Letter to an Angel*, an interior procession, and in *The Poet*, as the prisoners shook in nothingness, relinquishing all their worldly possessions. They pray to God in devastation of this sacrificial turmoil to the point of nihilism: a failure to value the present moment in its 'eternal nowness'. This manifesting is dissatisfaction with and ultimately a hatred of the world, life and oneself. Without salvation, the mortal beings may just perish.

The expression in *Leaf On A Pillow*, *The Poet* and *Letter To An Angel* is yet again nihilistic that to Nietzsche is an existential ailment or nausea for a different or a better world but a yearning which in its "otherworldiness", inevitably depreciates and devalues this earth and this life. Perhaps *Lewa* in *Letter to An Angel*, is a child of deprived idealism (truth, love) and that the only way out is to revolt or die in silence. This revolting is articulated by Garin at each of his creation as *Lewa*, out of rage, in the end, murdered *Kuda Liar*, the connecting source

to all his frustrations. Yet, this is honesty at play, honesty that is devoid of answers, devoid of meaning; an inter-terrestrial longing. As also in *Leaf On A Pillow*, humanity is “sick” from the effects of development. Modernity, perhaps to Garin, simply suffocates. Garin’s film has its moments of ellipsis that engages viewers in a continuous process of interpretation, imagination and recollection. This elliptical treatment is a call for a step closer to austere and pure cinema. A large part of Garin’s films leaves a space of meaning as emptiness that is meant to be contemplated and interpreted by the spectators, a means of completing through imagination. Avoidance to a complete statement is a statement he deliberately avoids as no person can know everything. This is not a final statement but a starting point, not an end but a beginning. Garin seems to say that humans must be prepared to accept change in what is before them and that this is inevitable. In the *Poet* and *Leaf on a pillow*, this inevitability is depicted in a kind of poetic beauty enhancing on its melodramatic potential by not disclosing how the deaths of his characters took place. Seno Gumira Ajidarma (2004) expresses Garin’s *Leaf on a Pillow* as “a sweet sketch of poverty that is poetic and borders on being melancholic.”

Nothing escapes the dialogue of the poet within its creation. Garin’s films represent his way of thinking and his philosophy of life that evokes the interdependence between art and life. As in *Letter to an Angel*, *The Poet* and *Leaf on a Pillow*, Garin’s perspectives seemed complementary, at times demanding a connection, at other times, naturally exclusive, even contradictory. This is the combination of his meta-cinematic element as Garin, the documentarian infuses an intriguing emulsion of fiction and truth. Perhaps, it is the belief of Garin that life is subject to fate and that human beings must ultimately reconcile themselves to their destinies. Realities in these destinies are revealed in layers even if it is shown in a single shot. The storyteller in *The Poet* does not just tell the stories, he lives and relives it in the preceding shots and scenes that Garin creates from the light of his own contemplation. This is a contrasting yet in gentle irony perfects a contrast to the image. Beauty in Garin’s sense does not exploit pity (Seno Gumira Ajidarma, 2004).

The fixed camera suggests a deep respect for the actors as a subtle indirectness of human discourse. This treatment is visible every time Ibrahim Kadir appears in *The Poet*, telling his stories in fluctuating dramatic rhythms. It is also prevalent in the focus of the woman prisoners dancing and singing songs of love for their children. The slow pulsating rhythm enhances the quality of the image as the terrifying states of the prisoners

are shown (shaking of hands, covering of face, refusal of food) building up disorder in emotions and a sense of metaphysical anxiety inside and outside of screen. The use of deep focus is seen in the detailings of the subject and object (faces, hands, feet, clothings, food, gestures) in the prison, giving equal importance to each. This further enhances the realist underpinning in his films. Garin, in this sense, shares the most unique quality of Tarkovsky's cinema. He is observing the very language of life, as though hoping in this way to "hear" the language of God (Pearse, 2005). It is here that beauty arises.

A true artistic image gives the beholder a simultaneous experience of the most complex, contradictory, sometimes even mutually exclusive feelings ... We cannot comprehend the totality of the universe, but the poetic image is able to express that totality.

(Andrei Tarkovsky, 1987)

## **The Seventh**

Beauty<sup>5</sup> is in the eye of the heart. One has seen beauty if one has seen the multiplicity in singularity of images before them. The mind then constructs images from the light that stimulates it, into the thousands of *photogrammes* that is melded into pictures of scenes, that endures over time. How this is so can be a mystery as each one's perception lies at different stations and realms. Beauty is rejuvenated in the films of the photo-poet, grasping the true beauty; truth. Eco (Andrew, 1984) exclaims the usage/ function of cinema as a tool that communicates 'known truths' or serving the function of the aesthetician. These are the truths that can only be communicated by a truth seeker; revelations of histories downright into its makers and into the birth marks of its people. In a way, a sense of uniformity and one that abides by the virtue of its headman is clearly seen like a code that cannot be broken. When *Lewa* in *Letter to an Angel* breached this; the taking of stilled photographs of bare chested little girls from a neighbouring village, the code was broken. Somehow, in one of these moments, Garin seeks the affinity of his people; the majority of Indonesians who have fallen apart and he is putting *Pancasila* at the stand, in his own court. The Sumbanese becomes a barometer that represents Garin's hopes for his people. This trajectory to *Mitry* (Andrew, 1984) is controlled by the 'poetic movement' of the film; vertically, from the ground up whose stories unfold through repetitions of allusions and recognition where it comes out and extends into the world that is

developing on the screen. At times, Garin paints a Monet and at other times a Van Gogh; as interplay of light and dashes of colour on his screen palette. Garin's poetry is art that paints the beauty as well as the ugliness. He sees a Monet in the spirited livelihood the street urchins live, unified in its brotherhood. He trembles at the colourful images of the prisoners (faces) even in its projection of simplicity (black and white) finding comfort in their reminiscences of love and the energy of living found in the circular mode of the *Didong* in *The Poet*. He captures the heart of the child in need of a sense of belonging, in need of love amidst the dots of the brutal Van Gogh's brush he had to undergo in *Letter to an Angel* and *Leaf on a Pillow*. Perhaps, this is the "artistic image" that to Tarkovsky (1987) could never be "expressed in a precise thesis, easily formulated and understandable" and that is precisely the point. Garin has the potential to create a cinema with a unique ability of the film image to communicate Truth more effectively (or affectively) than language. This affectiveness refers to distinct states of feeling that to Deleuze, is both lasting and spasmodic by means of the facial close-up as expression, the expressive power of the human face or the magnifying power of the close-up but with certain movements and series of shots (Shwartz, 2000). Garin's image is able to reveal the totality of the universe and allows the viewer to experience simultaneously complex and contradictory feelings.

In his treatise on the aesthetics of cinema, *Sculpting in Time*, Tarkovsky writes, "The image is an impression of the truth, a glimpse of the truth permitted to us in our blindness. The incarnate image will be faithful when its articulations are palpably the expression of truth, when they make it unique, singular-as life itself is, even in its simplest manifestations" (Hancock, 1996). Garin's *Letter to an Angel*, *Leaf on a Pillow* and *The Poet* are truth that is greater than fiction found in the life of its characters. This is a testament of his belief that films manifest itself directly. It is not necessarily descriptive as found in literature. Screening direct account of this gives due respect to film as film, without imposing unnecessary detail. In such an instance, his film adheres to simple, pure realism as in Haiku, yet it is liberated from it as a piece of art, those of his and his alone. This is a cinema that challenges the conventions of realism (Du Plessis, 2007). To Tarkovsky (1987): "Art symbolizes the meaning of our existence."

In simulacra, beauty exists in unison with ugliness. There is no mere plot nor narrative to it as in life too as beauty in its own existence is as such. It is as it is. Garin depicts this act of motion in emotion, a didactic

exclamation to the penumbra of his thoughts, not by the means of likeness but by the content of likeness. To quote Livingston, "Instead, the cinematic medium's exclusive capacities involve the possibility of providing an internally articulated, nonlinguistic, visual expression of content" (Smith & Warternberg, 2006). The construction of meaning of Garin's salvation is the locus of his aesthetics that becomes the vocabulary of his medium, a precious enactment of its singularity. He encloses upon the density and the sparseness of the beauty in consummation to what it is dying for; a transcendent awakening. Such beauty is not easy to grasp as he is usually at war with cultures and religions that is not of his, even if he belongs to a similar nationhood. Hours and minutes are but seconds into this realm of singular time-conscious beauty this photo-poet seek to penetrate, even in absence of his being. Greatness in this is the spirit of Garin that sees beauty even in momentary elliptical blindness that to Herzog (2001) as the 'zone of indeterminacy or 'gap'. To Deleuze, this pause provides the space from which acts of thinking and creation arise.

The unseen has become the seen and the dot of the seen is transformed into a poem of varying degrees of rhythms and repetitions that knows no ending to its beautified experiments, an extension to the vocabulary of cinema. To Tarkovsky, this is a distilled poetic expression. Such is the worldly and destitute medium that is resurrected by the photo-poets as they too are in need of a surreal vision of salvation, a metaphysical dimension based on personal belief. As in Tarkovsky's *Stalker*, a voice of some invincible presence was heard. In Garin's, the voice is his interterrestrial spirit speaking, of perhaps the word of God given a name as the 'letter' and that the *Angel* as the messenger to carry Garin's innermost message to God. Perhaps, this is the dilemma Bazin spoke of as a "Fall" from sacred to secular space, an original sin which necessitated a later cinematic redemption (Andrew, 1984). This exclamation of the challenges of humanity in film is a rightful journey as film is said to be the "right" art; the expression of an artist. Garin's internal monologue in *Letter to an Angel*, *Leaf on a Pillow* and *The Poet* are but stations in his own life with a universal validity for the audience. The life of the photo-poets, seemed easier said than done. It is a winding quest. It is a primal affair of the unconscious, as dreams; being the function of human wishes and fears. Garin subscribes to Freudian's central belief that art mediates the unconscious in a special way (Andrew, 1984). He consumes the beauty of beauty in the known, the unknown, in the actors and characters, in the landscape of ruins as well as the living. The beauty he seeks is never without challenge. It is the holy in art that he as the photo-

poet ascends to as martyrdom awaits; as fire flies to the Fire, the photo-poet sees the fire as Light, like a call to Moses, a beauty that he readily submits to even if he could perish for the glory enlightenment. From the beginning of time as well as the beginnings of picture in motion, it is the breath of this beauty that is in unison. The beauty of this breath assists the photo-poets in ascension of its existence; the beauty that underlies all colours; a colourlessness affirmation of the Real, for it is hidden and unseen but can only be felt.

It becomes the fruit of Garin's photo-poetry. Going against it is a lesson he embraces, in history, in culture, in the denomination of the arts and science as it ascends and descends. Such repetition is but a singular moment in time of separation and pious affirmation of the transcendental, one that is invoked and is being invoked for moments in time. In duration, beauty finds its means of expressionism, means as surreal as life can be. The meditation upon this is by far a testament of the glory of life, one that can only be comprehended as beauty. Beauty lies not in the outer but the inner, the inner of the figural as well as nature. This is the beauty of the essences of being. In singularity, love finds its purpose in a poetic embellishment of the grains that the film strips is willing to abide by. Justice under beauty is sentimental, anarchic and subliminal, justice that is endowed by truth seekers such as the photo-poets. In *Letter*, Lewa acquires a Polaroid in exchange for a piece of traditional weaving needed as props for a shoot. The camera becomes Lewa's (Garin's) tool in his opposition to this transplantation of national imagery (Sen, 2004). The beauty that lies innate of all culture is imbued by or in the eyes of its living mechanics (people). What they perceive to be perfection may not be so in other living mechanics, thrown into different continents and languages. Such beauty, though tragically sweet to the people of *Sumba* is shown by Garin; the slaughtering of horses, the act of adultery and the breaching of humane renaissance. Santayana (1955) discusses art in its opposites, the positive/negative aspect. To this, he says:

Evil in art may be instrumental to the happiness of those whose "physiological complexion" demands catharsis, and is justified on moral grounds. One may undergo a venting of emotion upon experiencing the evil in tragedy, or may react by engaging one's own consciousness, leading to a sublime release from interaction with the object. By creating the conditions for the sublime and the activity of contemplation, evil in art is morally justified in extending the spirit's function to pure contemplation of the realm of truth.



In likeness, there is great difference as time moves spaces but many things remain still. If as Tarkovsky writes that the very act of creation is proof that we share the attributes of the creator, then it is here that we find the majesty and beauty of Garin's films, as he explores the properties and textures of the human and its multiple levels of regions with nature. This is beauty, that in a singular moment attest to the Beauty of creation and is embalmed in the medium of film. In synchronicity, this embalment seeks the forging of ties, deep within the black hole of the photopoet's journey, memories and dreams, subconsciously freeing and consciously imprisoning. This black hole refers to imagination ([www.film-philosophy.com/vol4-2000/n17fairbairn](http://www.film-philosophy.com/vol4-2000/n17fairbairn)) that to Kearney is that of Kant's 'Transcendental Idealism', which sees imagination as the 'common root of all our knowledge', to Husserl's 'eidetic phenomenology', which sees imagination as both *sui generis*; that is, its own beast, distinct from perception and necessary for the intuiting of 'essential truths', through Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology, which locates imagination at the centre of the phenomenon of time and thus necessary to human being (Dasein) as it gathers up its past and projects itself into the future, to Sartre's existential phenomenology, with its emphasis on concrete, lived experience, or Being-in-the-world.

As in *Letter to an Angel*, Lewa steals his father's body, drags it to the edge of the village where his father spent most of his time and takes a photograph to place in his school book; a kind of tracing the eternity of creation and of love. In *The Poet*, the prisoners begged to be shot instead of being beheaded as they look at themselves as an eternal creation, bodies that are in unison in creation, a creation that should never be separated. This is an eternal act, a self-preserving act with the capacity to 'become' beautiful as suggested by Santayana (1896), a delight that is, in motion of this exemplary life of the photo-poet. Granting absence in nothingness and the value it brings. Photo-poets derive the strength to ascend towards "spiritual fruition" of beauty that is figuratively spoken in context of its singularity of forms in shots and scenes. To Santayana (1896):

The spiritual fruition consists in the activity of turning an apt material into an expressive and delightful form, thus filling the world with objects which by symbolizing ideal energies tend to revive them under a favoring influence and therefore to strengthen and refine them.

Beauty does not reside in the object but in the individual's sense of beauty (Santayana, 1896). Senses become manifold, achieving material

goodness, with values that are positive, intrinsic and objectified. What is projected onto screen by the photo-poet is intensified in their senses, awaiting birth, the sensation which receives a subjective interpretation and interpenetration. Almost spirit-like, the self (photo-poet) vanishes, as a sense of gratitude to nature for the birth of his art. In humility, he finds great wisdom in art itself as he breathes endlessly, a full realization of his singularity with beauty. In Garin's *Letter to an Angel*, the characters Malaria Tua and Lewa spend their happiest moments playing on an old Japanese war planes even if the foreign object bears no particular economic or cultural power. The Japanese was never mentioned in the film, Madonna was never identified and Gorbachev is simply explained as a 'powerful man.' The test is in embracing the ambiguity in the wholeness of the picture depicted as beauty comes in many faces and it is indeed an experiential journey, those that we may or we may not comprehend. Du Plessis (2007) writes:

Poetry effects a fairly blend legitimization perhaps, of the medium of cinema; the artistic. Film poetry serves as a kind of unexamined trump. It announces a critical discourse that attempts to master the unruly energies of cinema in terms of aesthetic individuality and the language of 'high art.'

The inclination of the photo-poet lies in his consciously subconscious appeal towards the Real that is endowed upon with the attributes of beauty. What lies innate in the hearts of the photo-poet is further ingrained and embossed upon the image he creates. Garin depicts the life of those who could not achieve presence, those who craves for connection with others who inhabits the same space or time. Garin silently exposes his longing for intimacy or union with his inherited past, his ancestors and the lasting presence of each. When one creates, he, as a human, is a co-creator for he is, in the absentness of God, takes charge. The creation of beauty by Garin can be intriguing as he traverses the light as well as darkness in order to achieve a kind of equilibrium that superimposes upon beauty as an aesthetic instrument of the filmmaker. This can be seen in *Leaf on a Pillow*, as *Asih*, the batik seller, took in the street urchins as her own child to be cared in their most vulnerable state. She, undeniably a victim herself from the gambler husband, endures. *Asih* in frustration is seen grinding chilly and in a state of conscious frustration, fear and enstrangement, rubs the chillies to her mouth. A kind of purification she triumphed upon as the heat of the chillies seemed nothing to her. The fears and pain she is going through has made her an immortal.

*Asih* is the *Gaia*, the maternal beauty Garin holds on to in his tradition of nationhood. This ties in with Doebler (2008) in discussing the style by Cezanne that "... He wanted to make something solid and enduring, which seemed to him to lack simplicity, grandeur, and especially that sense of structural unity that can transform into a whole even the most fragmented view."

As the images the photo-poet constructs is given breath (motion), even in statism, the photo-poet is well aware of God's order, "Rest in motion, but do not stop". There exists an encircling wish in the minds of the photo-poet for it to be fulfilled. Wish of the ideal and the perfect, intertwining truth that is revealed in contrast, in contraction and expansion of the images he forsakes. It is only then that beauty arises. In *Letter*, Garin constructs a concrete image of local communal identity in opposition to the imagined national identity; *Lewa* being brought to justice in a collision course, the law of the land and the law of the nation. In *Letter to an Angel* too, Garin distinguishes between 'local' and 'traditional' and that it is not identical. It is to be comprehended in their purity (Kristianto, 1995). He seeks a relationship to world cinema as a way out of some the limits within which Indonesian cinema was constrained (Sen, 2004) where at least three quarters of the films in the last thirty years either implicitly or explicitly set in Jakarta and its surroundings. Garin takes the extremely rare film sets on other islands of Indonesia (Ibid). To Green (2006), "In poetic cinema, elements of form prevail over elements of meaning and determine the composition (process of reduction-sparseness) as depicted in Ozu's concentration on the essentials." Garin took a similar approach in *The Poet*. The space of the film is the space of captivity, shot entirely inside two prison cells and the guard's foyer, a dim formless space shot in low resolution, black and white digital video. The sense of fear could be felt within the claustrophobic compound, augmented by the pervasive camera which gazes into tightly crammed corners filled with sleeping bodies, pins people against the cell walls and creeps listlessly in close-up across the startled eyes and clenched faces of prisoners awaiting the call of death.

This treatment of the essentials, to Garin, is comprehending beauty in the microcosm where Garin engages upon a meditation, a microcosmic meditation. Garin meditates on the significance of the slightest experience, narrated by the characters, the eating, the laughing, the bathing, the prayer that is focused as it is the very time they live in the prison, the atomic life that is awaiting dispersion. This meditation is beauty in singularity as the guiding principle of making and perceiving so as to secure harmony and

balance amidst chaotic, disorderly distractions (Santayana, 1927). It is indeed a powerful meditation. As the photo-poet ascends, so does beauty, though unseen, is in harmony with the very act of creation for beauty does not and cannot stand on its own. It has to be resurrected in motion by the photo-poet in the realm of the projected light of cinematic creation. Beauty is a culmination of vibration (light) and motions, feelings and colours, tempos and rhythms, a contrasting element to the world, at times (dreamy) and is subconsciously existing, existing in the realms of the consciousness, sought by the photo-poet. The space that Garin endows upon manipulates atmosphere and they are present as really aesthetic cinematographic elements (Seno Gumira Ajidarma, 2004). The mind ascends as the body works and perfects its parts into a singularity. Beauty denotes catharsis, the kind that Garin is indebted to, a kind of purity as Bresson sees that does not have to, "... imitate, like painters or sculptors, novelists, the appearance of persons and objects, the creation or invention confines itself to the ties you knot between the bits of realities caught" (Doebler, 2008).

Perhaps the icon in *Letter to an Angel* is the letter, the letter that contains *Lewa's* deepest secrets, needs and wants, Letters that are supposed to arrive into the hands of the designated Angel, how these letters are delivered and whether it is truly delivered. Could these letters represent Garin's childhood in *Lewa* as an aspiration, his longing for beauty in opposition. In himself, Garin internalizes present and past. In him all the qualities of *Lewa* co-exist asynchronously. His discovery in creation of this beauty is purely legible, purely possible. Garin and *Lewa* share the same *denotatum* (similarities) and it is also ironically a *noemata* (different). It is those that he thrives upon in cultured surrounding, the Javanese soft spoken articulated moments, almost dance-like, lyrically poetic, almost Beauty in contrast within itself.

Beauty – as the pure aesthetes have discovered – is not intrinsic to any form: it comes to bathe that form, and to shine forth from it, only by virtue of a secret attraction, agitation, wonder, and joy which that stimulus happens to cause – not always but on occasion – in our animal hearts. (Santayana, 1955, p. 256)

His beauty is a subjectivity that is objectified. Film, a presumably mechanical art dwells into the quality of a thing that introduces a beautiful formation of the figural, complementing nature and culture. This is predominant in Garin's *Didong in the Poet*. The aesthetics of the poet; the sufferings expressed in a dance covered with emotion of the same

intensity is a realization of sharing a common plight that merges into the rhythm of the dance (Sato, 2004). Somehow, it becomes a symbolization of artistic freedom under oppression. In Asian traditional culture, religion teachings and entertainment is intended to reach a high level of refinement in good manners. This becomes strength as one is able to restore one's self-confidence and pride, both shaken by problems related to the Western world (Sato, 2004). Garin, to Sato has the tendency to find spiritual support in his tradition (2004, p. 99). The subjective experience of pleasure becomes objective because of its projection onto an object (Altman, 2007). This ideal aesthetics of Garin enhances his stylistic disposition to be suspended, "to avoid tainting the image with subjective forced meaning" (Kondrashov, 2006). Garin seeks external beauty that to Bazin (Matthews, 1999), is ultimately the manifestation of God, the extremity of images that is mummified, in what Plato terms as knowledge before birth and what Santayana sees as absolute truth. Beauty is in the eye of the heart of Garin that he superimposes the images before him, those that transcends above and beyond as a singular affirmation of the living that never dies. Records Andrei Tarkovsky (1987): "... I wanted to show that man can renew his ties to life by renewing his covenant with himself and with the source of his soul ..."

What is transpired onto the celluloid is but dots that flow under the artistic fingers of the photo-poet, invoked by the letters and verbs before them and the endless energy giving sustenance: man and nature, renewing the life-line of images of the existing living: the 'becoming' (Maszalida Hamzah, 2006). This is a strive of love for Garin with "the crucial questions of his existence, and at its most sublime, to be expressive of the transcendent and induce in the beholder what can be called a *Religious Epiphany*; an apprehension of the absolute, the infinite, of Truth or God" (Savio D'Sa, 1999). To Tarkovsky (Johnson & Petrie, 1994): "My function is to make whoever sees my films aware of his need to love and to give his love, and aware that beauty is summoning him."

## **Conclusion**

As the photo-poet dissolves into the creation from light and as he becomes alive within the time for all time, he ascends. This is his spiritual longing that he sees as a healing through crisis. This is the hopes and fears of human salvation he sees within himself that in cinematic moments is

prone to be pure; the pure cinema. As he ascends, his artwork is slowly crafted bearing in the reality of truth that paints his freedom in thought; the freewill at play. To him this is a singular experience. The photo-poet in this instance is in awe, bewildered by the beauty that he has finally seen in his photo-poetry. It bewildered him in a sense that beauty exist in a simultaneous experience of the most complex, contradictory, sometimes even mutually exclusive feelings...that he sees in the poetic images he has created. Meditation upon beauty in the photo-poet's heart is a Beauty in Singularity. It only attests to the awareness for his need to love and to give his love, and to his awareness that beauty is summoning him. To this, the ascension of the photo-poet is eternal; a Religious Epiphany.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Many spiritual traditions, accordingly, share a common spiritual theme: the "path", "work", practice, or tradition of perceiving and internalizing one's "true" nature and relationship to the rest of existence (God, creation (the universe), or life), and of becoming free of the lesser egoic self (or ego) in favor of being more fully one's "true" "Self".(en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spirituality).
- <sup>2</sup> To Tarkovsky, while man always remains the same, or more appropriately does not remain the same but develops, to infinity .
- <sup>3</sup> Art may be, in some respects, in as antithetical relation to life, but the process, in a person, of experiencing art is actually, part of life. We find ourselves as we look or read, in *media res*; the fate that Levinas (1989) says has no place in life is what occurs when we stop looking or reading.
- <sup>4</sup> To Tarkovsky, when a great work of art becomes a masterpiece, it expresses a certain greatness of human spirit.
- <sup>5</sup> Aesthetics covers reflection upon the phenomena of signification considered as artistic phenomena. The aesthetics of cinema is therefore the study of the cinema as an art and the study of films as artistic messages. It implies a conception of "beauty" (Aumont, Bergala & Vemet, 1992). It is (art) the branch of philosophy dealing with beauty and taste (emphasizing the evaluative criteria that are applied to art);WORD.net

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