

# Content Analysis of “27 Steps of May” (2018) Using Auteur Theory

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**Abstract.** Indonesian cinema has been evolving quite rapidly these past few years, many great movies that strive beyond commercial and quantity purposes have been brought into realization by many young rising filmmakers. Ravi Bharwani with his drama *27 Steps of May* serves as one of the movies that best elaborate on Indonesia’s dynamic as its finest and most analyzed worthy. This case study is rich in semiotics and best showcases Bharwani’s preferred filmmaking style, making him an auteur in the making.

**Keywords.** Indonesian cinema, Ravi Bharwani, *27 Steps of May*, Semiotic, Auteur, Filmmaking style.

## 1. Introduction

Since the first documented locally produced film, *Loetoeng Kasaroeng* (1926), the Indonesian cinema has developed to be more of a commercial entity. With some striving for better quality and the rest focusing on the number of films, these make Indonesian cinema a perfect medium for public space, that also values artistic expression and experiment. In Southeast Asia, Indonesia, with a population of 260 million is fast becoming one of Asia’s biggest film markets. Entering a dazzling new Golden Age of cinema, international and local films are taking in huge revenues, as one of Indonesian made film, Joko Anwar’s *Horror Satan’s Slave* took around US\$11m, and another booming domestic production like Falcon Pictures’ romantic drama *Dilan 1990* that grossed an estimated US\$16.6m.

However, there are still only 1.600 screens in Indonesia, as a result, only 13 percent of Indonesians have cinemas that are within accessible range in their neighborhood, making it much more difficult for them to watch a new release than almost any other nation in Asia.

Nonetheless, the investors are optimistic and have been flooding in to capitalize on this potential to build cinemas around the country. Along with more open access from government regulations regarding cinema and investment in film, the public has been more exposed to a higher level of media literacy and film appreciation. The evolution of the Indonesian film industry is marked not only by its economic development but most importantly by the country’s best filmmakers. One of them being Ravi Bharwani, a director, writer, and producer that one of his finest works includes a drama film he directed, *27 Steps of May*. He graduated from the Jakarta Institute of Arts (IKJ) in 1990 and was later involved in numerous commercials, documentaries, short films, and television productions. His debut feature, a

romance drama *The Rainmaker* traveled to numerous film festivals and received the Asia New Talent Award at the Shanghai International Film Festival in 2005. His next movie is a drama-family movie called *Jermal* (Fishing Platform), released in 2008, where he co-direct alongside Rayya Makarim, who soon will write and produce *27 Steps of May* with Bharwani.

## **2. Method**

The method used in this paper is qualitative analysis method through literature study relating to Indonesian cinema and study case, which in this case is Ravi Bharwani's *27 Steps of May* (2019). The aim of this method is to dig into Bharwani as an auteur and his influence within Indonesian film scene and what influenced him in terms of his filmmaking style. The Auteur theory argues that a film is a reflection of the director's artistic vision; so, a movie directed by a given filmmaker will have recognizable, recurring themes and visual cues that inform the audience who the director is and shows a consistent artistic identity. Using the three premises of the auteur theory may be visualized as three concentric circles, technique, personal style, and interior meaning, *27 Steps of May*, will be dissected and analyzed to support Bharwani's perspective and take on Indonesian Cinema.

## **3. Results and Discussions**

The storyline of *27 Steps of May* is thickly inspired and submerged in the backstory of the 1998 political turmoil era of President Soeharto, where it caused chaos all around the metropole city of Jakarta and its neighboring areas. During that period, Indonesian civilians showed their lack of trust in the government and took it down to the street to protest in the hope to overthrow the officiate president. This situation quickly became unruly and overwhelmed the country's security defense, causing people to take advantage of the lack of security and soon raided shopping malls, supermarkets, and even houses in wealthy areas. This historical tragedy that leads to a higher crime rate also targets minorities, especially Chinese Indonesians that majorly comes from medium to the upper-class social-economic background. The huge gap between the wealthy and the poor and the monetary crisis that supports that gap, caused the poverty and employment rate to rise, resulting in higher criminal behavior tendency during that era.

*27 Steps of May* portrays the life of two father-daughter main characters whose lives were deeply affected by that tragic era. May who is only 14 years old during that time was walking home alone one night and became a victim of intentional rape by a few men. Ever since that incident May isolated herself and refused to participate and be a part of the society due to her deep-rooted sexual trauma that debilitates her. May's father, played by Lukman Sardi, was shown to constantly live-in guilt since he blamed himself for that incident and for not being able to protect his daughter. He then takes care of her during her isolation and tries his best to adapt to this new way of living to protect May and minimize things that might trigger her panic attack.

*27 Steps of May* intentionally submerges the audience in a slow-paced routine that May and her father must live through all these years. This gives the audience a sense of distress through May's self-induced isolation and obsessive-compulsive routine to minimize anything that might trigger her panic. The audience in a way is forced to face what it feels like to have trauma that debilitates things that were once considered easy to do, the way sexual abuse victims are forced to participate in something they do not condone doing. This lost sense of control and ownership over their own body and action in May's case is the trigger to her compulsiveness to neatly arrange her surroundings, appearance, and the food that she puts in her body, which is the only thing she feels that she has control over.

Written and produced by Rayya Makarim, this film premiered on February 15th, 2019, at Plaza Indonesia Film Festival, and had also successfully been screened at *Bengaluru International Film Festival (Biffes)*, *Mar Sharm El Sheikh Asian Film Festival (SAFF)*, and *Cambodia International Film Festival (CIFF)*. Through acting in this film, the main character who plays May, Raihaanun, successfully

won the main actor category in Festival Film Tempo, and the best female leading role in Festival Film Indonesia.

### 3.1. Technique

Ravi Bharwani as a filmmaker said in an interview that a deep and lengthy research process was conducted to find facts that can support the building of May’s character, as well as developing the script and screenplay. Bharwani and Makarim, the two geniuses behind *27 Steps of May* agreed on creating a script with as minimal dialogue as possible, going with the nature that May has a deep sexual trauma and intentionally chooses to be mute. Bharwani said that with that in mind, the movie was made to strive closer towards more meaningful and realistic body gestures to convey messages and feelings he wants the audience to receive. This makes the movie more interesting and cinematic in a way, said Bharwani. The pre-production process itself does not require a lot of in-depth training as Raihaanun did a great job in researching and interpreting the script herself, regardless some breakdown script sessions were being held to further help guide Raihaanun for the gesture and mimic guide, and few practical workshops to guide with blocking so the actors are made familiar with space and movement.

One of the most important characters other than May and her father is the Magician. This transformational character was created to trigger May’s and the audiences’ sense of wonder. May was pictured to be someone that lives in a “bubble of numbness”, quoted from Bharwani. She muffled her emotions and every possible stimulation from her existing life, and so the presence of the Magicians allowed her to be reintroduced to sound, lights, color, tastes of food, and even enjoyment.

From this movie, Bharwani expects the audiences, especially women watching this movie to know that women are beyond capable of anything and that women are emotionally strong even stronger than men, proven by May’s ability to self-heal and even heal her father’s emotional trauma simultaneously. Bharwani also hopes that this film can be accepted and understood emotionally by the audiences, he wants the audiences to feel for May and understand the trauma that someone like May had gone through. He also hopes that through acting and gesture the message can be conveyed to the feelings and emotions of the audiences. Bharwani as an auteur is also consistent with constantly bringing emotions to life, especially through family relations that are strained as shown from his other movie *Jermal (Fishing Platform)* (2008) that brought up the topic regarding child labor and missing or strained relationship with a father figure.

### 3.2. Personal Style

After the traumatic incident that happened to May when she was only fourteen, eight years later she was shown as an older self with the same trauma that shackles and binds her to some mental illness that debilitates her. May spends her day every day doing routines that were scheduled to minimize unexpected triggers that might make her feel like she’s losing control over her own life and relive that night. May was shown as a character that obsesses over details in a compulsive way, she hides behind all the neatness she strives to discipline herself as a form of subconscious punishment to make herself feel proper again. In scenes that are majorly filmed in May’s confined bedroom, the grading looks dull and low in saturation, with less vibrancy to give a gloomy feel that best describes the life of May and her father.



**Figure 1 & 2.** Room decorations fell on the floor.  
(Source: 27 Steps of May. 2018. Green Glow Pictures)

Symbolic system of traumatic incident portrayed as Figure 1 and 2 that small props of May’s room decoration fell on the floor. These props are taken as extreme close-ups and focus on the foreground, the composition, and framing used in a personal conversation to the audience to identify the emotion of May.

### *3.3. Interior Meaning*

May’s unstable emotions along with her polarity also affect her father’s mental stability. In one of the scenes, her father was shown trying to vent his emotions by wrecking his garden decorations. This scene was shot with handheld camera technique, to achieve natural shakiness that represents her father’s mood and emotions, so the audience was brought into the chaos.



**Figure 3 & 4.** Room decorations fell on the floor.

Another technique that was just as interesting in term of editing and camerawork was showcased in one of the scenes where May was having a panic attack and it jumps cuts to a close shot of a doll that fell out and broke out of its box to the floor, and other colorful decorations in her room that also fell. This editing technique gave meaning to the consecutive shot, it juxtaposed May and the condition of the broken doll. The cut itself was rather fast and jumpy, therefore it gave an impression of uneasiness.

## **4. Conclusions**

Bharwani is a rising filmmaker that constantly strives to emphasize the emotional aspect of his characters, seen from his preferred style of filmmaking, including cinematography, editing, and mise-en-scene. This gives the characters he created a more realistic feel, relatable and alive. Audiences are given enough room for interpretation based on gestures and mimics of the mostly mute main character he built. Raihaanun as the main actor also plays a big role when it comes to bringing the character of May to life, all supported by her acting skill and ability to do further research on her own. This proves that Indonesian cinema has come into an era where both filmmaker and actor can showcase the best interest of the movie at heart, with in-depth research during the scriptwriting process, practical workshop, amazing screenplay, and thoughtful acting. This puts Indonesian cinema on a track of achieving better recognition and more

appraisal from the international eye, with more young rising filmmakers in the future the possibility of Indonesian cinema having more filmmaker auteurs is seemingly very possible and promising.

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