
FILM AND VIDEO REVIEWS

The Letter: A Message for our Earth. Directed by **Nicholas Brown**. 2022. 80 minutes. Colour.

The film's title announces its purpose; that is, to be an audiovisual manifesto for the public to act effectively to protect the Earth. The letter concerns the encyclical "Laudato Si" written by Pope Francis in 2017. In that document, the religious leader calls on people worldwide to engage in the socio-environmental cause. The film seeks to carry out this activist task and departs from letters sent by the pope to environmental leaders based in four different regions of the world. The first of them is a Senegalese man who survived an accident while trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea. The second is a leader of the Maró people who survived an assassination attempt by illegal loggers in the Brazilian Amazon rainforest. The third is a young Indian activist, member of an international collective that fights climate change. Finally, the fourth letter is directed to a pair of scientists who are carrying out research into the extinction of coral reefs in Hawaii. They were chosen respectively to represent "the poor", "indigenous peoples", "the youth", and "nature". To this end, they are invited to go to the Vatican to meet with the leader of the Catholic Church and propose solutions to climate change based on their experiences. It is worth noting that none of the five people identifies as Catholic. The group shares how the Islamic and Hindu religions, as well as the Amerindian cosmology and atheism, all have environmentalism as a common interest. In this way, the pope is presented in the film as a global leader of

environmentalism and not just a Catholic leader. It is no coincidence that most of the pope's speeches chosen to make up the film have scientific data as their main reference. The emphasis on Catholicism is more easily recognizable when the group visits the Italian city of Assisi. There, an effort is made to demonstrate how St Francis would have been an environmental activist as well as to trace the genealogical origin of ecology back to the 13th century. The film's aesthetics at certain moments are reminiscent of a typical documentary about wildlife, as it lists a series of images of forests and animals synchronized with an informative voice over about the evils of urbanization. Cities are characterized by the destruction and chaos caused by climate change, while forests and oceans are characterized by the harmony and plenitude that would be their antithesis through constant image oppositions between urban and natural landscapes. At other times, the film's aesthetics resemble reality television, as it follows the arrival of the letters at the protagonists' homes and their journeys to and from Italy mediated by a presenter. Streaming services have popularized these film languages that can be effective in engaging the viewers. Being produced by YouTube Originals and distributed free of charge, the film ends by asking for it to be broadcast at public events.

The more than 8 million views in 12 months may suggest that the film has partially fulfilled its political-religious goal.

Adriano Godoy

The Brazilian Center of Analysis and Planning
adriano.godoy@cebrap.org.br

Wawan's prayer. Directed by **Robert Lemelson**. 2022. Elemental Productions, 23 minutes.

Wawan's prayer is like *All god's children* a documentary telling the story of people with autism in Indonesia. This time Robert Lemelson has acted as director and Ninik Supartini was producer, but a whole series of people has contributed, among others four interviewers, six persons who made transcripts, and ten translators. The large number of people shows how much the film was a team effort.

Wawan's prayer once more tells the story of the difficulties people with autism have to overcome in Indonesia. His parents, who run a tyre shop in the city of Banjarmasin, at first did not know well what to do with their son, who could be jumping around the house till 3:00 in the morning. Certain sounds or images on television could trigger violent outbursts in him. Wawan is fortunate with two loving parents, who are proud of him and have tried hard to find help.

His father accompanied Wawan to a healer, a haji, who concluded that Wawan is possessed by a spirit. The healer claimed that with the imposition of his hands on Wawan's head, a potion prepared by himself and with Allah's help Wawan could be cured. A viewer believing in biomedical care may look down at such healing practices as "superstition", but the film does not make such moral judgement. It merely shows the options for help open to parents. Wawan's father also wonders what causes autism. Is it a virus? How to prevent it?

Another opportunity to help Wawan opened up when they heard of a private

boarding school specialised in teaching children with autism. The school, called Sekolah Khusus Autis (special school for autism) Bina Anggita, is found in the city of Yogyakarta and run by Muhammad Yasin, who is also co-producer of the film.

The specialised school is doing Wawan well. For instance, he calms down, which is partly attributed to a therapeutic diet (no bread from flour, no cow's milk, no artificial colouring, that is, no European food). The school gives its pupils the extra time on teaching that regular schools cannot offer.

At the Bina Anggita school Wawan can develop skills that autistic people often have. For instance, he was able to retrace all data on the school computer that were accidentally deleted. If this was achieved in the seclusion of the school, at another moment Wawan got public recognition. He was winner of the MTQ (Musabaqah Tilawatil Qur'an) of Yogyakarta, an important Koranic recitation contest. His capacity to remember things came to good use in these achievements.

While the special school was an outcome for Wawan, it still posed a drain on resources of his parents. They missed him when he was in the boarding school and paid tickets to visit him or to bring him home twice a year. Banjarmasin and Yogyakarta are situated in two different islands of Indonesia and the air fare can be considerable for most households.

The documentary *Wawan's prayer* is important to illustrate the practical obstacles autistic children and their families face in Indonesia and show them in a positive light. Not only his achievements

are mentioned, but also his religiosity. As soon as he hears the call for prayer, he starts ablutions. Another value positively represented is parental love, which is most vividly illustrated when his mother visits Wawan in the boarding school and the two greet each other. The two values of religiosity and parental love come together in the comment from the mother: “It is not our wish that a child is like that. There is the Supreme Power who wanted it. If God gives us a child with autism or special needs [...] there is a special door to heaven for the parents”.

Inevitably, the film raises questions that remain unresolved. For instance, the question why Wawan is often walking around with a bundle of banknotes in his hands. As it is, it seems there are no other children in the boarding school; what kind of interactions take place there and how does the environment react to the children in school?

The film makers have clearly chosen for a positive and optimistic, if not propagandistic, story. The fact that the school principal was co-producer may have played a role, and the school yard, for instance, looks unrealistically tidy and clean-swept. Nevertheless, taking the companion documentary, *All god's children*, into account, it is more likely that this call for recognition of autistic people originates with the film makers. This is an important statement to make in Indonesia. Viewers in the West can take another message from the film, namely the strength people find in Islam. Because of these positive goals, the fact that the film may perhaps show a somewhat sanitized image

of the life and situation of Wawan can easily be forgiven to the film makers.

Freek Colombijn

Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, The Netherlands
f.colombijn@vu.nl

All God's Children. **Robert Lemelson** (Executive producer). 2022. Elemental Productions, 67 minutes.

All God's Children tells a story about Idris, a teenager who has non-verbal autism spectrum, from a poor rural area in Central Java, Indonesia. In the documentary, his single-parent mother, Isti, is struggling to take care and meet Idris' basic needs due to the lack of financial support and facilities. Moreover, their neighbours stigmatize Idris as an evil-possessed lunatic who needs to be healed. This complicated condition makes it difficult for Isti to obtain the appropriate treatment for Idris.

The documentary conveys several important messages. First, it helps us to understand Idris' condition as a person with special needs and follow his journey in developing his capabilities with the support from people around him. Further, it shows the important roles of family, local community, government institutions, and experts in supporting children with autism in Indonesia.

Perhaps the most unique part of this documentary is a scene where Isti and Idris conduct a shower ritual and go to an *orang pintar*. *Orang pintar* literally means “smart person”. In Indonesian, but people use this term to refer to traditional healers and people with clairvoyance power. This trans-medium expert is believed to have the ability to see and communicate with unseen

spirits and heal those who are ill. Many urban middle-class Indonesians usually go there only after they have exhausted all medical options, but they prefer to go to the doctor first. However, Isti does not have the financial resources to access proper medical care for Idris, which is why she goes to *orang pintar*.

One scene in the documentary is particularly powerful when Isti meets Hermi, another mother who lives in the more urbanized part of Central Java and has an autistic child named Osa. In this scene, Isti feels a bit stressed about Idris whose behaviours disturb their neighbours. Hermi encourages Isti to be gentler to Idris. This part shows us that the role of supportive people who have similar experience is important for both Idris and Isti. At the same time, the fact that Osa is able to access more educational and treatment facilities shows unequal access to facilities for people with autism between urban and rural areas.

There are scenes that will be difficult to understand for people without a thorough knowledge of Indonesian culture. For instance, the very first scene, when Idris, Isti, and another man, bring an offering; he pours sea water over Idris and throws a white chicken to the shore. There is a similar scene when two people bathe Idris

in the water fountain. As an Indonesian, I am familiar with those activities. The first one is a traditional Javanese praying ritual, and the second one is a form of traditional treatment from a religious healer. Without a more complete explanation, viewers might wonder about the meaning of those activities. Further, the film could have provided more scenes comparing the availability of services for people with autism in rural and urban areas. Doing so will better highlight inequality between the two areas in providing specialized help and care.

Overall, the documentary nicely captures the many layers of problems for people like Idris in Indonesia and the Global South. The story of Idris can encourage people to learn more about issues pertaining to people with disabilities. The last set of scenes ends the documentary with an uplifting note: as a result of support his from family, local community, government institutions, and experts, Idris is now welcomed by his neighbours. Hopefully, the film can help diminish the stigmatization of people with autism in Indonesia and elsewhere.

Rachma Lutfiny Putri
Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, The Netherlands
rachmalputri@gmail.com