

## INTERVIEW: JOKO ANWAR

For this edition of IMAJI, we conducted a deep interview with Joko Anwar, had a peek at his childhood and reviewed his creative processes in filmmaking.

Joko Anwar is a household name in Indonesia, well-known to the public as one of the country's celebrated film directors. His movies include *Janji Joni* (2005), *Modus Anomali* (2012), *Pintu Terlarang* (2009), and *Perempuan Tanah Jahanam* (2019).



(Source: [www.instagram.com/jokoanwar](https://www.instagram.com/jokoanwar) )

### **What happened in your youth that made you to want to be a filmmaker?**

I was born and raised in an environment not conducive for a kid to learn and grow. All my life lessons I got from watching films. I became very familiar with movie theaters from since I was 5 and went to watch movies by myself from since I was 7. When I came to know that films had somebody who made them, at around 10, that was when I decided I wanted to be a filmmaker.

### **Today, people can learn to make films by watching audiovisual products on YouTube. What are the fundamental requirements to be a filmmaker in your view?**

A movie provides a rewarding viewing experience if it successfully makes the audience want to willingly enter the universe constructed by the filmmaker and follow each character's

journey. I am convinced only a filmmaker with a rich life perspective can do this. A filmmaker does not have to be wise nor know the answer to all life's questions, but rather understands that people learn from peeking into somebody else's life. Filmmakers seek out that other somebody's life and serve it up for the audience watching a film. Shooting a film can only be done if we are well-versed in the technical things which can be learned, including from YouTube, and possess an esthetic, which you can develop, depending on how much you were exposed to, or allow yourself to be exposed to, many different points of view. So, the very basic requirement for a filmmaker is being humble enough to want to absorb all the viewpoints that appear in your life. These can appear in your day-to-day existence or come from deliberate observation.

**When compared against going to a formal film school, what does a good film education constitute?**

I don't want to pretend I know that answer, because I have no idea what film school is like. What I do know, some filmmakers I consider outstanding went to film school, like Martin Scorsese and David Lynch, and some didn't go to film school, like Paul Thomas Anderson and Terry Gilliam. So, I think comparing places where people learned how to make movies is unnecessary. What I do know, because making movies involves machinery and technology, it is imperative you master them. There are some who say, to become a director a person has no need to master the camera, nor how hardware and software work for editing images, but only have mastery for storytelling. This is delusional. Because, in film alongside our esthetic, we use equipment to tell the story. So, to me, a good film education, formal or informal, needs to encompass:

1. good technical grounding in theory, mastery of hardware and software, then:
2. a learning environment that encourages each student to find the impulses in themselves to tell a story. Because a film needs to be personal. This can come from restlessness, making a statement, or having a viewpoint on certain issues. And so, also important is:
3. understanding that filmmaking is communicating with your audience. A film, even though it needs to be personal, needs to be communicative to the targeted audience.



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**Were there, or are there any Indonesian or international filmmakers who have influenced your work? Can you expound on this?**

There are some movies that influence me when I make my films, and often only when the film is done do I realize certain elements in the work were influenced by another work. But I'm a person who prefers looking at a film rather than who its creator is. I'm crazy about many films, but I never idolize the maker. Some films I truly admire, and which often show influence in my work: "Don't Look Now" (1973), "The Conversation" (1974), "Chinatown" (1974), "Z" (1969), "Badlands" (1974), "Mean Streets" (1973).

**It can be said your movies spring off from the psychological situation of your characters. Is this so? If yes, please elaborate.**

I deliberately do not aim to focus on the psychology of my characters. But I always take off from things I experienced when I was trying to create them. Oftentimes, from trauma or agitation triggered by uncertainty. Because I start off at that level, very often my characters are people going through internal conflict.

**In other words, you think there's a causal relation between psychology and film. Can you comment using your work?**

I really believe an engaging film is one that can make the audience enter the minds of the characters, regardless of whether they agree with them or not. If this is achieved, the viewing experience will be so much richer. To this end, I always try to create scenes in my movies

that go beyond what are seen. More according to what the characters do not verbalize. It could be this is what makes some of my work feel psychological.



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**When you work, is the audience a consideration, say, a specific segment, or a general audience?**

It differs from film to film. There were films I made to talk to a specific audience segment, and others aimed for a general audience. It's the same whenever I talk to someone: a certain person would need me talking in a certain way for my message to get through. The same goes for filmmaking. But in the matter of audience numbers, that's the responsibility of the producer and the marketing team.

**Of your films to date, which one was the most satisfactory to you? And why?**

I am ever grateful that the last film I make will always be the most satisfying. Because I always fix different challenges for each film, and I never make the same film twice, not even if it is a continuation of something I had made before. I don't want to get bored nor allow my creativity to die, so I always make new targets I need to reach.

**In your career trajectory, how do you handle fundraising to get a production going?**

I am very grateful I have never faced money problems whenever I wished to make a movie. But this could be because I position each film project as realistically as possible. For instance, when we made the movie, "A Copy of My Mind" using the narrative viewpoint of a not so

common person, I positioned the project for a small budget. Only Rp 250 million, which mostly I obtained from pitching forums in film festivals.

**Can you tell us what sort of movies you plan to make in the future?**

All the movies I have made so far are part of a large plan. That's why in all my films I slip in a clue of the movie to follow. I am a movie buff. I watch and love all the genres, so I do not want to be limited to one genre. The story chooses the genre. I will always kick off from the story, then decide what genre fits in best with that story. My future films will always remain personal, but they will also be explorative in nature.



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**How do you view policies that govern film production in this country, including the role of government? How should we make available production equipment and related facilities?**

This pandemic is to me the perfect moment for government to show that it sides with Indonesian cinema. Currently, an increasingly intensive dialog is going on between the government and industry players, more so than ever before in trying to find a solution to safeguard Indonesian cinema during the pandemic. Prior, policies and infrastructure were sorely lacking in the quest to establish a strong film ecosystem. Now the pandemic can be a good starting point for synergetic cooperation among stakeholders, especially cineasts and the government.

**From way back, marketing of Indonesian films always bumped against imported movies. Ideally, how should we go about marketing our own films?**

So far, our own films have already carved a niche for itself in-country. It enjoyed a 50 per cent market share before the pandemic. And it will continue to garner public trust toward Indonesian films. But, yes, it's not easy finding a robust marketing model for a society like Indonesia, which is so diverse. So, currently, the challenge faced to market Indonesian films is not the imported film market. It is finding an appropriate marketing model to diverse Indonesian audiences.



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**Do you have a strategy to break into the international film market?**

It is imperative the technical and esthetic qualities be on par with the highest quality international films. We also need to understand which film genres are easily acceptable to an international public, say, horror and action movies. And we need to be diligent in participating in film festivals of good repute. To break into the world market, Indonesian movies need to be unique enough to make audiences want to look. This uniqueness can come from culture. But we need to take care not to alienate offshore audiences. We need universal themes, but with a local Indonesian viewpoint.

**What needs to be improved in the annual Indonesian Film Festival?**

FFI needs to be a celebration of film for Indonesian filmmakers and audiences. To that end, it's not enough to just hand out trophies. There should be screenings, film parties, and opportunities for direct dialog between filmmakers and audiences.

**How do you assess the role of film critics, film scholars, and publications on Indonesian cinema?**

There are far too few in quantity. The same for quality. We need film studies on Indonesian cinema dished up in a popular way so that film literacy spreads wider.