

POPULAR CULTURE AND FREE THINKING IN EDUCATION: THE CASE OF AADC AND LASKAR PELANGI

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the representation of free thinking within Indonesia's post-reformation educational discourse through an interpretive analysis of two landmark Indonesian films: *Ada Apa Dengan Cinta?* (2002) and *Laskar Pelangi* (2008). Employing a qualitative methodology grounded in cultural studies and thematic analysis, the research investigates how characters, settings, dialogues, and symbolic elements serve as vehicles for conveying critical thinking values and educational resistance. The analysis is conducted across two interpretive layers—denotative (literal) and connotative (ideological)—to trace both surface-level representations and deeper cultural meanings embedded in the films. Drawing on theoretical frameworks from Stuart Hall's theory of representation, Paulo Freire's concept of critical pedagogy, and Raymond Williams' notion of lived culture, the study reveals how AADC emphasizes personal emancipation through self-reflection, literary consciousness, and emotional courage, while *Laskar Pelangi* highlights collective resilience, access to education, and the moral urgency of learning in marginalized contexts.

Findings suggest that free thinking is portrayed as an active and evolving process that involves intellectual courage, critical dialogue, and resistance to normative constraints—whether social, institutional, or economic. Both films function as informal educational texts that challenge dominant pedagogical models and promote alternative visions of learning. These insights underscore the pedagogical potential of integrating popular culture into curriculum design to foster critical awareness, emotional engagement, and socially responsive education.

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini mengkaji representasi pemikiran bebas dalam wacana pendidikan Indonesia pasca-reformasi melalui analisis interpretatif terhadap dua film Indonesia yang berpengaruh: *Ada Apa Dengan Cinta?* (2002) dan *Laskar Pelangi* (2008). Dengan menggunakan metode kualitatif berbasis studi budaya dan analisis tematik, penelitian ini mengeksplorasi bagaimana elemen naratif—seperti karakter, setting, dialog, dan simbolisme—digunakan untuk menyampaikan nilai-nilai berpikir kritis dan resistensi terhadap dominasi pendidikan konvensional. Analisis dilakukan dalam dua lapisan pemaknaan, yakni denotatif (harfiah) dan konotatif (ideologis), untuk melacak representasi permukaan sekaligus makna budaya yang lebih dalam. Dengan merujuk pada kerangka teori representasi Stuart Hall, pedagogi kritis Paulo Freire, dan konsep budaya hidup dari Raymond Williams, penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa AADC menyoroti emansipasi individu melalui refleksi diri, keberanian emosional, dan kesadaran literer, sementara *Laskar Pelangi* menekankan perjuangan kolektif, akses pendidikan, dan urgensi moral dalam konteks marginalisasi struktural.

Temuan penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa pemikiran bebas direpresentasikan sebagai proses aktif dan dinamis yang memerlukan keberanian intelektual, dialog kritis, dan perlawanan terhadap norma sosial maupun institusional. Kedua film berfungsi sebagai teks pendidikan informal yang menantang model pedagogi dominan dan menawarkan visi alternatif tentang pembelajaran. Temuan ini menegaskan potensi pedagogis budaya populer untuk diintegrasikan ke dalam kurikulum demi membangun kesadaran kritis, keterlibatan emosional, dan pendidikan yang responsif secara sosial.

Key words : Free Thinking, Cultural Studies, Indonesian Education, Popular Culture, Film Analysis

INTRODUCTION

Education is not only a tool for intellectual development but a crucial mechanism in shaping democratic, critical, and reflective societies. In post-reformation Indonesia, education reform became a national priority, aiming to shift learning from rote memorization to student-centered inquiry. The introduction of the Competency-Based Curriculum (KBK) in 2004, followed by the School-Based Curriculum (KTSP) in 2006, reflected efforts to foster critical thinking and independent learning.

However, the practical implementation of these reforms has faced significant challenges. Studies by Ilyas (2015) and Rustam & Priyanto (2022) show a persistent gap between the intended curriculum and actual

classroom practice. In particular, activities that encourage analytical or critical responses remain underrepresented in student textbooks and learning modules. The table below summarizes findings from relevant studies indicating the lack of critical thinking content in national curricula:

Table 1. Critical Thinking Indicators in Indonesian Educational Textbooks (Hamzah Puadi, 2015)

Curriculum Type	Grade Level	% of Activities Encouraging Critical Thinking
KBK	Senior HS	14%
KTSP	Senior HS	19%

This data reflects a systemic issue: the policy discourse promotes intellectual freedom, but classroom culture often defaults to obedience and memorization.

Simultaneously, Indonesia's post-reform cultural landscape experienced a surge in expressive, youth-centered media. Films such as *Ada Apa Dengan Cinta?* (2002) and *Laskar Pelangi* (2008) became cultural phenomena that did not simply entertain but inspired reflection on identity, education, and autonomy. According to cultural studies theorists like Stuart Hall and Raymond Williams, such texts serve as ideological arenas where power and resistance are negotiated. These films offer informal yet potent learning environments that complement and sometimes critique formal schooling.

The choice to analyze AADC and *Laskar Pelangi* stems from their significant social impact and their distinct portrayals of educational aspiration—one rooted in urban literary introspection, the other in rural collective struggle. Both invite viewers to consider education not only as institutional practice but as a personal and political journey.

The objective of this research is twofold:

- (1) To examine how the literal (denotative) portrayals of characters, school settings, and dialogue in these films reflect free thinking within Indonesia's educational discourse; and
- (2) To explore how symbolic (connotative) elements—such as metaphor, narrative structure, and emotional conflict—embody deeper ideological meanings related to intellectual emancipation and resistance to conformity.

In this way, the study positions popular films as cultural texts that not only mirror educational ideals but also serve as catalysts for reimagining what critical and independent learning can look like in Indonesia's evolving democracy.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research methodology grounded in theoretical and interpretive inquiry, drawing primarily from the field of cultural studies. Rather than relying on empirical fieldwork or statistical generalization, the research undertakes a critical textual analysis of two influential Indonesian films: *Ada Apa Dengan Cinta?* (2002) and *Laskar Pelangi* (2008). These films are selected not only for their popularity and cultural significance but also for their narrative engagement with educational themes and

representations of youth agency, intellectual resistance, and socio-cultural transformation. As cultural products released during the post-reformation era, both films serve as entry points into broader discussions about how Indonesian society, particularly its educational discourse, has evolved in response to democratic change and global influences.

The research is situated in the socio-political and educational context of post-1998 Indonesia, a period marked by decentralization, curriculum reform, and growing demands for educational equity and critical citizenship. Within this context, the study explores how popular media, particularly film, can function as a parallel educational space—informal yet influential—shaping how young people perceive learning, authority, and self-determination. Unlike traditional research that deals with population and sample selection, this study focuses on cultural texts. The "subjects" under investigation are narrative components of the two films: characters, plot development, dialogue, setting, and visual symbolism, all of which are analyzed for their pedagogical and ideological significance.

Data collection was conducted through multiple, close viewings of the films, followed by detailed transcription and annotation of key scenes. The selection of data segments was guided by six analytical categories developed from the literature on critical pedagogy and cultural theory: (1) Resistance to Dogma, (2) Intellectual Courage, (3) Self-Reflection, (4) Critical Dialogue, (5) Symbolism and Narrative Complexity, and (6) Moral/Philosophical Tension. These categories serve as interpretive lenses to unpack how the films articulate the ideals and challenges of free thinking within educational settings. In addition to the films themselves, the study draws on supporting sources such as interviews with the filmmakers, critical reviews, academic analyses, and curriculum policy documents, allowing for contextual triangulation and richer interpretation.

To ensure the credibility and validity of findings, this research employs a multi-theoretical triangulation approach. The primary theoretical frameworks include Stuart Hall's theory of representation, which explains how meaning is constructed and contested through cultural texts; Raymond Williams' conception of culture as ordinary and embedded in everyday practices; and Henry Giroux's (2004) view of popular culture as a site of pedagogy and resistance. These frameworks are supported by empirical findings from curriculum studies in Indonesia, particularly the works of Abidin et al (2023), Suprpto, Prahani, & Cheng (2021) and Hasan, Mokodenseho, Mohammad Aziz, & Yuniarti Utami (2023), which provide evidence of ongoing tensions between curriculum policy and classroom reality, as well as the role of media in shaping educational identity.

The analytical process involved two layers of interpretation. The first, denotative analysis, focused on the surface-level representation of characters, institutional settings, and student-teacher interactions—examining how these literal elements illustrate or challenge prevailing educational norms. This includes identifying moments in the narrative where characters engage in or resist formal learning, as well as examining how school environments are portrayed in relation to authority, conformity, and aspiration. The second layer, connotative analysis, probed deeper into the symbolic meanings and ideological tensions embedded within the films. Here, metaphors such as chalk, rainbows, libraries, and parting scenes were decoded to reveal broader philosophical concerns regarding emancipation, intellectual agency, and moral ambiguity. These symbolic readings are not static but are interpreted in dialogue with the viewer's socio-cultural understanding, aligning with Hall's argument that meaning is produced through articulation and reception.

Through this layered and theory-informed method, the study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how cultural texts—specifically Indonesian popular films—can illuminate the complex intersections between education, culture, and ideology. Rather than treating film as peripheral to formal learning, this research positions it as an active pedagogical agent that can inspire critical consciousness, challenge dominant narratives, and expand the space of education beyond institutional boundaries.

RESULT AND FINDINGS

This chapter presents the findings derived from a comprehensive interpretive analysis of two pivotal Indonesian films: *Ada Apa Dengan Cinta?* (2002) and *Laskar Pelangi* (2008). These works are examined as cultural texts that negotiate, critique, and reimagine educational discourse in post-reformation Indonesia. Using a dual-layered analytical model—denotative and connotative—the study interrogates how the selected films construct the idea of free thinking within different socio-political and educational settings. The investigation is framed through six key thematic lenses: resistance to dogma, intellectual courage, self-reflection, critical dialogue, narrative complexity and symbolism, and moral or philosophical tension. These themes not only emerge organically from the narratives themselves but are also informed by critical pedagogical theory, particularly the works of Stuart Hall, Raymond Williams, Paulo Freire, and Henry Giroux.

On the denotative level, the films foreground literal portrayals of educational actors, spaces, and encounters, presenting viewers with distinct yet complementary visions of youth and learning. In *Ada Apa Dengan Cinta?*, the portrayal of an urban, middle-class high school presents a hyper-structured environment that upholds discipline, image, and academic excellence as central values. Within this environment, the character Cinta embodies the norm—socially integrated, emotionally restrained, and academically driven—until her encounter with Rangga, a solitary, bookish, and ideologically detached student who challenges institutional and cultural expectations. Rangga's disengagement from school activities, his preference for reading politically charged literature, and his quiet resistance to social rituals mark him as a denotative figure of dissent. His presence destabilizes the narrative order of the school, not through rebellion in the conventional sense, but through intellectual aloofness and refusal to perform the roles expected of him. Cinta's transformation is central to the film's pedagogical arc; her journey from passive acceptance to active questioning reflects a shift toward internal emancipation and emotional agency. The school library, classrooms, and literary competitions serve not just as backdrops, but as structured arenas where the struggle between conformity and inquiry unfolds.

In contrast, *Laskar Pelangi* situates its educational narrative in a materially impoverished but spiritually resilient rural setting. Here, the characters of Ikal, Mahar, and Lintang emerge not as rebels, but as dreamers—children whose engagement with education is marked by hardship, community support, and moral discipline. The depiction of SD Muhammadiyah, a dilapidated wooden school on the margins of a tin-mining island, stands in stark opposition to the sterile, rule-bound institution in AADC. In this context, free thinking is not about subverting dominant norms, but about believing in the transformative promise of education in the face of economic determinism. Lintang's daily trek across great distances and threats to reach school becomes a literal enactment of educational perseverance. His thirst for knowledge, despite lacking material resources, makes him a powerful symbol of learning as an act of faith and defiance.

Teachers in both films embody different pedagogical philosophies. In *AADC*, authority figures are largely absent or peripheral, suggesting an educational system that is bureaucratic and disengaged from emotional or intellectual mentoring. In contrast, *Laskar Pelangi* offers rich characterizations of Bu Muslimah and Pak Harfan, educators who challenge fatalistic assumptions and affirm the intellectual dignity of their students. Their pedagogy is rooted in relational ethics, compassion, and culturally embedded knowledge. Through their voices and actions, the classroom becomes a space of imagination, creativity, and moral awakening. Their role affirms Freire's ideal of the teacher not as an authoritarian figure, but as a co-learner and enabler of consciousness.

Moving beyond literal representation, the connotative analysis explores the symbolic density of each film. *Ada Apa Dengan Cinta?* is rich with metaphors of silence, parting, and introspection. The library, as the scene of Cinta and Rangga's most intimate ideological encounters, becomes a sanctuary of intellectual vulnerability. Their conversations are not only about poetry but about freedom, difference, and the emotional cost of critical awareness. The airport farewell scene—a moment suspended in ambiguity and emotional charge—refuses closure, mirroring the incomplete nature of self-discovery and intellectual emancipation. This narrative ambiguity challenges the audience to reconsider the meaning of success, belonging, and love, not as fixed ideals but as evolving, contested spaces. The use of unresolved tension aligns with Raymond Williams' idea of culture as a process, not a product, a constant negotiation between dominant, residual, and emergent values.

Laskar Pelangi, though often categorized as inspirational, is equally layered in its symbolic complexity. The rainbow that appears toward the film's climax functions as a collective metaphor of hope and imagination, an aesthetic that lifts the narrative beyond realism into allegory. Chalk dust, makeshift blackboards, and classroom rituals are infused with sacred meaning, turning the mundane into the miraculous. The ultimate sacrifice, Lintang's departure from school following the death of his father—introduces profound moral and philosophical tension. His withdrawal underscores the limits of idealism when confronted with harsh structural realities. It is here that the film departs from the triumphalist arc often found in educational narratives and confronts the audience with the cruelty of inequality. Education, the film argues, is not merely about access, but about sustainability—and without systemic change, potential often remains unrealized. This tragic moment forces the viewer to reckon with the ideological gap between aspiration and lived reality, a tension that Paulo Freire famously identifies as the core contradiction of oppressed societies.

Both films, despite their aesthetic and narrative differences, converge on the idea that education is deeply intertwined with identity, agency, and resistance. In *AADC*, intellectual freedom is pursued through art, language, and emotional confrontation—what Giroux might describe as a “border pedagogy,” where learning occurs in the interstitial spaces between culture, affect, and critique. In *Laskar Pelangi*, it is through community, struggle, and moral commitment that education becomes transformative. The dialogue in both films functions not merely as a narrative device but as a pedagogical tool: in *AADC*, the exchanges between Cinta and Rangga deconstruct romantic tropes and elevate adolescent introspection into philosophical reflection; in *Laskar Pelangi*, classroom dialogue represents a counter-discourse to rote memorization, affirming the value of collaborative inquiry and expressive learning.

The findings of this analysis reveal that *Ada Apa Dengan Cinta?* and *Laskar Pelangi* do not simply depict education—they theorize it. Each film presents a distinct epistemological stance: one grounded in aesthetic autonomy and inner liberation, the other in collective resilience and ethical relationality. Together, they constitute a rich cinematic archive of how post-reform Indonesian society negotiates the meaning of learning, freedom, and social transformation. These texts challenge prevailing narratives of educational success and invite viewers—students, teachers, and policymakers alike—to reimagine schooling as a site of critical becoming, not just academic achievement.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined *Ada Apa Dengan Cinta?* (2002) and *Laskar Pelangi* (2008) as cinematic articulations of free thinking and critical engagement within Indonesia's evolving educational discourse, particularly in the aftermath of the political and curricular reforms of the post-Reformasi era. By employing a dual-layered analytical framework—denotative and connotative—this research has demonstrated that these films serve not only as mirrors of societal values but as active producers of educational meaning. Positioned within the theoretical lens of Cultural Studies, particularly drawing on the works of Stuart Hall, Paulo Freire, Raymond Williams, and Henry Giroux, the analysis affirms that popular culture can function as an alternative curriculum: a space where norms are questioned, ideologies negotiated, and new subjectivities formed.

The two films offer contrasting yet complementary visions of what it means to think freely in the Indonesian educational context. *Ada Apa Dengan Cinta?* situates free thinking within the psychological and emotional terrain of urban adolescence. Through the character of Cinta and her intellectual confrontation with Rangga, the film explores how introspection, emotional risk, and literary dialogue become acts of resistance against conformity and superficial social norms. The school setting, with its image-conscious culture and silenced intellectual spaces, becomes a metaphor for the broader constraints of the formal education system—an institution that often rewards compliance over curiosity. Yet, in moments of rupture—especially in the library and during the airport farewell—the film gestures toward education as a journey of internal liberation, where meaning is found not in external achievement but in personal awakening.

Conversely, *Laskar Pelangi* projects a more collective and materialist portrayal of educational struggle. Set in a geographically and economically marginalized region, the film foregrounds how education can function as both a lifeline and a battleground. The characters of Lintang, Bu Muslimah, and Pak Harfan embody resilience in the face of poverty, showing how critical thinking is not the sole domain of the privileged, but an act of moral conviction that emerges even in the most under-resourced conditions. The rural school becomes a counter-space—a sanctuary where dignity, creativity, and cultural identity are nurtured through pedagogical care. Yet, the film does not romanticize struggle. Lintang's forced withdrawal from school, despite his brilliance, confronts viewers with the tragic reality that systemic inequality often determines educational outcomes, regardless of individual will or effort.

Taken together, these two narratives offer a powerful critique of the dominant educational structures in Indonesia while simultaneously reimagining the possibilities of pedagogy beyond institutional confines. *Ada Apa Dengan Cinta?* invites viewers to reclaim emotion, literature, and introspection as legitimate components of intellectual growth, while *Laskar Pelangi* insists on the ethical urgency of providing

equitable access to meaningful learning opportunities. Both films affirm that education is not simply a technocratic endeavor concerned with grades, exams, and job readiness. Rather, it is a deeply ideological, cultural, and affective process—one that shapes the formation of individuals and the fabric of society.

The findings of this study also speak to ongoing debates in Indonesian curriculum reform, particularly the tension between standardized knowledge systems and culturally contextualized learning. As echoed in the works of Suprpto et al. (2021) and Abidin et al. (2023), the shift toward more student-centered and locally grounded curricula demands that educators pay attention to the lived experiences, emotional worlds, and cultural texts that shape students' intellectual development. In this regard, both *AADC* and *Laskar Pelangi* function as pedagogical interventions—challenging educators and policymakers to think beyond the classroom and engage with the broader sociocultural ecologies of learning.

Ultimately, this study affirms that popular culture—and film in particular—can act as a vital space for critical pedagogy. In portraying education as an emotional, ethical, and political journey, both films invite viewers to not only consume meaning, but to reflect on their roles as thinkers, learners, and agents of change. In doing so, they expand the discourse of education in Indonesia, urging a more humane, reflective, and liberatory approach to what it means to know, to teach, and to grow.

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