

**EMANCIPATING DESIRE, EMPOWERING FANTASY:
CULTURAL POLITICS OF CONTEMPORARY CINEMA
IN INDONESIA AND MALAYSIA**

BUDI IRAWANTO

*(B.A. (Hons.), Gadjah Mada University
(M.A.), Curtin University of Technology*

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DECLARATION

Hereby I declare that the thesis is my original work and it has been written by me in its entirety. I have duly acknowledged all sources of information which have been used in this thesis.

This thesis has also not been submitted for any degree in any university previously.



BUDI IRAWANTO

19 September 2014

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SUMMARY

Political changes since the *Reformasi* movements in 1998 in Indonesia and Malaysia not only provide fertile ground for an “inter-reference mode of analysis” (Chen, 2010), but also an optic of emerging new visual politics amidst socio-political upheavals in these two countries. This thesis examines the intricate and co-constitutive relationship between cinema and politics within the fast changing socio-political landscapes of contemporary Indonesia and Malaysia since the *Reformasi* era. Employing an “inter-referencing” method and drawing on Jacques Rancière’s and Alain Badiou’s theories on the potentiality of cinema for progressive social change, I examine new film practices, genres, networks, industry structures and social struggles in Indonesia and Malaysia today which are aided by the advancement in new digital technology.

Unlike established film industries in the West, the structure of Indonesian and Malaysian cinema is marked by irregularities of economic activities (absence of film distributors, declining film theaters, rampant film piracy) that allow the emergence of a multitude of amateur and independent filmmakers outside the commercial film circuit who have contributed to the creation of a new mode of indie film production. The interconnections and informal networks formed by a “new generation” of Indonesian and Malaysian filmmakers have facilitated an alternative indie filmmaking whose spread is aided by grass root film festivals and events organized by film communities. Facilitated by the Internet, the new indie filmmaking has flourished given new virtual structures of distribution and expression which enabled it to escape from dependency on oligarchic domination and state censorship.

While conventional genres still exist, the young Indonesian and Malaysian filmmakers infuse unconventional themes (racial and religious pluralism, alternative sexuality, troubled youth and urban crisis, marginalized peripheral places) into existing genres, which make visible and audible those who have been unseen, unheard, uncounted and discriminated within society. This thesis argues that contemporary Indonesian and Malaysian indie films can no longer be understood simply as a critique or allegory of existing socio-political conditions. Rather, they signal a “coming of democratic society” which has yet to materialize but is nonetheless making its presence amidst rising conservative moral forces, social cleavages, and desperation of authoritative regimes in these two countries. As a major study of Indonesian and Malaysian independent cinema since 1998, employing an inter-referencing approach, this thesis offers intriguing insights into the interactive flows of structures, visions and politics of the independent film communities in these two countries.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Cinema is the ultimate pervert art.

It doesn't give what you desire; it tells you how to desire.

Slavoj Zizek (*The Pervert's Guide to Cinema*, 2006)

Because cinema has its centre in the gesture

and not in the image, it belongs to the realm

of ethics and politics (and not simply to that of aesthetics).

Giorgio Agamben (2000, p.56)

Background of the Study

In the early days of *Reformasi* (democratization movement)¹ in Malaysia, the Malaysian journalist Sabri Zain wrote an entry in his diary (which was later published as *Face Off: Malaysian Reformasi Diary*) with an evocative title "A Day at the Cinema." As stated in his diary, on 26 September 1998, Zain and his friend planned to watch a movie at the Central Market in Kuala Lumpur. However, after they bought tickets, they went down to Jalan Tunjku Abdul Rahman (TAR) to buy a gift for their friend. Unfortunately, as they reached the junction of TAR, they met with a few thousand protesters faced by the Federal Reserve Unit (FRU) barricade, water cannons and troopers, a line of horse-mounted police and a helicopter. By the time they were on their way back to the Central Market, they witnessed a sudden shouting by FRU troopers as they charged at the dispersing crowd with flying shields and batons waving in the air. Zain concludes this diary entry with the following words: "By the time we reached the Central Market (still pretending as though we were on a casual evening stroll), we'd

¹ While the real origin of the term "*Reformasi*" was unclear, it became a popular catchword using widely (particularly in the mass media) to refer to unorganized mass movements across Indonesia in 1998 that demanded a change in Suharto's authoritarian regime and a reversal of the deteriorating socio-economic conditions caused by the Asian financial crisis in the mid 1990s.

decided to forget about the movie—we'd had enough excitement for the day. The helicopter was still buzzing above our heads as we took the train home" (Zain, 2000, p.9).

I was intrigued by Zain's experience as I look into the relationship between *Reformasi* and cinema.² Zain obviously had no regret over cancelling his intention to watch a movie as the intensity of having observed a real political event had made up for the lost chance to the cinema. Zain perhaps did not realize then that the *Reformasi* would be a cause for a proliferation of independent filmmaking in Malaysia. He probably also did not know then that nine years later since his witness of a demonstration, his diary turned book would inspire a fellow countryman, the independent filmmaker Amir Muhammad, to make a documentary entitled *Malaysian Gods* (2009), that records several pivotal social protests which took place that very same year subsequent to the sudden sacking of the Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim on 2 September 1998. Likewise, Malaysia's neighbor, Indonesia, has also witnessed the rise of the freedom of expression through widespread independent filmmaking in the aftermath of the collapse of Suharto's authoritarian regime on 21 May 1998.

Clearly, the diminishing powers of autocratic leaders (Suharto and Mahathir Mohamad) followed by the explosive outburst of "freedom" and "political liberalization" opened up democratic spaces that led to a flourishing of independent filmmaking both in Indonesia and Malaysia. The main thrusts of the *Reformasi*

² Although in general terms "cinema" and "film" are used interchangeably, in this thesis they can be differentiated categorically. The term "cinema" refers to a totality or multiple aspects related to film (such as aesthetics, social, cultural, technological, economic, and political aspects), whereas the term "film" refers to a work of art or materiality of audiovisual medium. More specifically, cinema can be defined broadly as a complex configuration of filmic representations (fiction and documentary) in various genres, modes of distribution and exhibition through multitude platforms as well as consumption shaped by technological development and socio-political conditions. In popular usage, the mass media use the term "movies" (a shorthand for "moving pictures") to refer to a product of creative industry which highlights a commercial aspect of the audio-visual medium. Meanwhile, in the context of America, James Monaco notes the differences among movies, film and cinema: "'movies' like popcorn, are to be consumed; 'cinema' (at least in American parlance) is a high art, redolent of aesthetics; 'film' is the most general term with fewest connotations" (1997, p.228).

movement in Indonesia with a rallying slogan against “corruption, collusion and nepotism” (better known as “*Korupsi, Kolusi, Nepotisme*” or KKN) were about respecting human rights, enforcing law, holding fair elections and reducing military power (if not confining the military to the barracks).³ Meanwhile, unlike Indonesia’s drastic regime replacement, the political movement in Malaysia –which adopted the Indonesian term *Reformasi* along with its slogan against “KKN” – was instead more of “a succession of attempts to forge a new political alternative” (Weiss, 2001) and marked by the formation of a new oppositional political alliance and growing expectations about an eventual regime replacement.⁴ As it appears, the democratization process in Indonesia and Malaysia is characterized more by uncertainties, messiness and paradoxes rather than by any neat, linear process or resolutions. The vibrancy of a growing pro-democracy movement in Indonesia and Malaysia is paralleled by the rise of religious conservatism that endeavors to thwart liberal expression at every opportunity and acts to heighten racial and religious tension within these plural societies.

Interestingly, the proliferation of democratic spaces during the early years of *Reformasi* movement coincides with an advance of digital technology in these two countries which in many ways also helped the spread of democratization. Among other

³ For some interesting studies on the early days of *Reformasi* movement in Indonesia, see Budiman, Hatley & Kingsbury (1999). There are proliferation of studies (mostly in a political economy perspective) on *Reformasi* movement and its impacts in Indonesia (i.e. Manning & Van Diermen, 2000, O’Rourke, 2002; Nyman, 2006).

⁴ For insightful study on *Reformasi* movement in Malaysia, particularly the role of civil society organizations and their coalitions (with a brief comparison with Indonesian experience), see Weiss (2000, 2006). Meanwhile, for interesting comparative studies of political resistances against authoritarianism in Indonesia and Malaysia since *Reformasi*, see Heryanto & Mandal (2006). In addition, for a comparative study of Indonesian and Malaysian *Reformasi* from a political economy perspective, see Pepinsky (2009). Although Pepinsky’s study was carried out after twelve years of Alatas’s (1997) comparative study on democracy in Indonesia and Malaysia, it still employed a conventional comparative studies approach in which it provided a hierarchical judgment of the different responses of two countries regimes toward the financial crisis and their effects upon the regime durability. Pepinsky’s study suggests that while the Mahathir’s regime in Malaysia has been successfully curbing the financial crisis by making a quite solid political alliance and neglecting the International Monetary Fund’s prescription by exercising the open monetary (capital) policy, the Suharto’s regime has dramatically collapsed because took almost the opposite policies of its Malaysian counterparts.

things, the rise of digital technology saw the spread of amateur and independent filmmaking, a mushrooming of grass root and independent film festivals, the rise of urban-based film communities and an emerging informal network among film groups. Moreover, both Indonesian and Malaysian filmmakers focus on similar contemporary issues of racial and religious pluralism, alternative sexuality, troubled youth, urban crisis, and marginalized peripheral regions. Unavoidably, they had also to deal with persistent censorship within their societies, which interestingly no longer arises merely from the state but also from conservative forces within civil society. Not surprisingly, both these societies encountered major controversies around independent and some critical commercial films which transgress cultural and religious taboos. These controversies often led to bans, censorship, boycott, protest and heated debates on film contents in the mass media.

Inter-Referencing Mode of Analysis in Asian Cinema Studies

The above-mentioned inter-related dynamics between Indonesia and Malaysia have encouraged this thesis to employ an “inter-reference mode of analysis” (Chen, 2010) to examine the politics of contemporary Indonesian and Malaysian cinema within a Southeast Asian context. Inter-referencing can be conceptualized as an endeavor to try to understand unfolding of social phenomena in Asian contexts and how these phenomena might take similar or different forms, contexts and meanings. Through this method, the identification of particular social formations, categories, experiences and politics may differ from normative categories arising from Euro-American experiences. This endeavor then enables to build an alternative or more nuanced knowledge or understanding of social processes such as democratization, liberalization, pluralism and minority rights that are currently unfolding in Southeast Asia. Using Southeast Asia as an imaginary anchoring point for “comparison” allows comparative regional societies

like Malaysia and Indonesia to become one another's reference points so that the common understanding of the self can be transformed, and established subjectivity rebuilt. In addition, an inter-reference approach helps "to avoid judging any country, region, or culture as superior or inferior to any other, and to tease out historical transformations within the *base-entity*, so the *differences* can be properly explained" (Chen, 2010, p.xv). In addition, this may help "to decenter and diversify knowledge production" and help "capture analytical registers, social categories and meanings that depart from Western ones" (Goh, 2014, p. 28). By the same token, postcolonial scholars such as Gayatri Spivak has argued for the need to "pluralize Asia" in order "to know the differences within Asia as imaginatively as possible" (Spivak, 2008, p.2). Applying Spivak's and Chen's ideas in the context of Southeast Asia, the process of "relativization" is vital to inter-referencing in which the task is not only to understand different parts of Southeast Asia but also enable a renewed understanding of the self and transcend existing understandings of the region and its component parts.

Indeed, the precedence of "inter-referencing" mode of analysis in studies of Asian cinema can be traced out in particular fields such as melodrama genre (Dissanayake, 1993) and popular cinema (Ciecko, 2006b). According to Anne Tereska Ciecko, melodrama can be conceptualized as a way of Asian cinema to "engage dialogically with history and memory, and traditional values and gendered roles (especially the institution of family and its surrogates), in a time of social, economic, and political change" (Ciecko, 2006b, p.27). In addition, according to film scholar Wimal Dissanayake, Asian melodramas represent "a confluence of tradition and modernity, Eastern and Western sensibilities, voices of past and present" (1993, p.5). However, in most Asian societies melodrama has a distinguished history considerably different from its history in the West and is intimately linked to "myth, ritual, religious practices and ceremonies " as well as "the dynamics of modernization taking place in

Asia" (Dissanayake, 1993, p.3-4). For instance, human suffering and family figures are pivotal characters of Asian melodrama that distinct from the Hollywood and European cinema.

Recent studies focus on styles, spaces, theory and aesthetics in Asian cinema (Teo, 2013; Pugsley, 2014). These studies seek to attempt to look at the local/ global encountered in the production, distribution and consumption of contemporary Asian films. Through closed reading of several influential works of eminent filmmakers across East Asia, Southeast Asia (Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia), South Asia (Bollywood) and West Asia (Iran), film scholar Stephen Teo argues, "Asian cinema is the mirror space of this contingency – with all attendant divisiveness and instability, its openness to change and transformation and its possibility for the union and celebration of common humanity" (2013, p.238). This is because to be "Asian", according to Teo (2013), should be located in "interactivity and connection" or "being not just Asian, but inter-, pan-, trans- Asian" (2013, p.238). In other words, the connection or interaction among Asian cinemas perhaps can be understood as a dynamic process of active reception, creative reinvention, concomitant assimilation and multidirectional nature of cultural flow rather than simply comprehended as an unequal cultural relationship.

Exploring the aesthetics of Asian cinema within a historically situated contextual framework, Pugsley (2014) suggests that Asian cinema, as an art form, "is marked by a number of key features [image, color, language and sound] that signify not only local or national identities, but often regionalities that make it recognizable to foreign audiences as part of a cinema of the Other" (2014, p.13). Therefore, as a fusion of art, technology and language, Asian cinema informs us the myriad cultures and traditions of the Asian regions.

Meanwhile, the geographical proximity, shared postcolonial history, same route of the struggle for a truly democratic society and same timeline and structural location in

the current capitalist system are some perfect rationales for conducting an inter-referencing between Indonesian and Malaysian cinema. In addition, an inter-referencing between Indonesian and Malaysian cinema offers several merits. **First**, it multiplies frame of references for understanding of Indonesian and Malaysian cinema while acknowledging that other (Western) cinema traditions (including Hollywood) as constitutive of film culture in both countries. **Secondly**, it helps to explore various cultural registers based on complex conditions within Indonesian and Malaysian cinemas rather than applying a “universal” model upon both countries in order to generate a non (hierarchical) judgment. **Thirdly**, it transcends a national framework in order to capture common or uniting categories that exceed (but not neglect) country differences between Indonesia and Malaysia within a Southeast Asian context. This provides critical as well as more open understanding of the concept of national cinema. In other words, while inter-referencing critically explores commonalities and differences between two countries, it looks at the possibilities of cultural confluence and encapsulates the dynamics of cultural translation between two neighboring countries in Southeast Asia region. While Southeast Asian cinema is not completely isolated from and affected by the domination of global (Euro-American) cinemas, cinemas in Southeast Asia take different trajectories as they are not only an individual artistic expression and part of the entertainment industry, but they are also the new critical politics taking shape in Southeast Asian society.

Through inter-referencing, we are able to gain more nuanced understandings of new structures, alternative networks, social struggles and new meanings in contemporary Indonesian and Malaysian cinema. Unlike Hollywood or established film industries in the world, the structure of the film industry in Indonesia and Malaysia are still fragile, marked by “informal” or irregular economic activities such as the absence of film distributor, the declining film theatres, the rampant film piracy, and the like. At the

same time, this structure allows the emergence of multitude amateur and independent filmmakers outside the commercial circuit and the creation of new mode of film production by young filmmakers in Indonesia and Malaysia. The informal network formed by independent filmmakers has facilitated the alternative film distribution and exhibition through independent and grass root film festivals or other forms of film events organized by film communities. In addition, the Internet becomes a new avenue for distribution and exhibition that overcomes the hurdles of an oligopolistic commercial distribution system and also bypasses the state film censorship. While some conventional genres still exist (action, drama, teen, etc.), young Indonesian and Malaysian filmmakers infuse unconventional themes (such as racial and religious pluralism, alternative sexuality, marginalized peripheral locales, urban crisis and troubled youth) into existing genres. Therefore, it can be argued that some contemporary Indonesian and Malaysian cinemas carve out new meanings of pluralistic society amidst the constant threat of conservative religious forces in both countries. In short, unlike most studies of Indonesian and Malaysian cinema, by employing an inter-referencing approach, my study offers a more inclusive view of Indonesian and Malaysian cinema as it opens up the possibilities for mutual influence and active translation between two countries.

Some notable studies on Indonesian and Malaysian cinema (i.e. Sen, 1994; Khoo, 1999, 2006; Van Heeren, 2009, 2012; Barker, 2011) tend to be cast in narrow national frameworks of analysis (a common tendency in studying so-called “world cinema” and “Asian cinema”) and hence lack comparative insights of other countries in Southeast Asia. While those studies provide invaluable detailed explanations and thoughtful analysis of the conditions and problems of Indonesian or Malaysian cinema, they still rely on a largely unquestioned national discursive territorialization of cinema in respective countries. My study not only sheds light on the different conditions of

contemporary cinema in Indonesia and Malaysia, but also, most importantly, offers some possibilities of cultural inter-referencing between two countries that are geographically contiguous and contain ethnic Malay and Muslim majorities yet with a high degree of ethnic and religious diversity.

Indeed, the significance of inter-referencing method is empirically supported by some common grounds between Indonesian and Malaysian or “Indo-Malay” cinematic world. The first common ground is both Indonesian and Malaysian government have prescribed “an official language” to their national cinema: *Bahasa Indonesia* and *Bahasa Malaysia* respectively. In the past, Malay language (the origin of both Indonesian and Malaysian national language) had played an influential role in building the identity of the Indo-Malay world and it had an important position as a literary and philosophical language of Islam. The fact that Malay language as an archipelago-wide lingua franca that already existed, facilitated the spread of Islam throughout the Indo-Malay world. However, formalization of *Bahasa* in national cinema has marginalized and even excluded various ethnic and vernacular languages as an artistic expression as well as political articulation in mainstream (commercial) cinema. Given that film production has centered in the capital city (Jakarta and Kuala Lumpur respectively), mainstream cinema has preferred to use ‘national’ (official) language instead of vernacular language as they are often controlled by film regulation and commercial motives.

The second common ground is the existence of a draconian film censorship regulation and other structural (political) constraints that have shaped the condition of textual production of contemporary Indonesian and Malaysian cinema. Furthermore, the institutionalization/codification of film censorship and other forms of social censorship led to canonization of particular genres sanctioned by government regulation as well as social norms. Despite being an instrument of political control, film censorship in Indonesia and Malaysia has claimed to protect national cultures and traditions (Sen,

1994; Van Heeren, 2009, 2012; Kusuma & Haryanto, 2009; Rowland, 2007). At the same time, filmmakers have attempted to protest those regulations and exercise their freedom although they still face political and social censorship (Van Heeren, 2009, 2012; Barker, 2011). Indeed, rather than merely identifying commonalities in the nature of film censorship policy in Indonesia and Malaysia, an inter-referencing method allows to look at different film censorship practices due to the different political cultures between two countries but being open with any possibilities of mutual influence.

The third common ground is under the banner of Islam a form of Indo-Malay consociation has been revived, highlighting one aspect of contiguity across the cultural-territorial identity of the Indo-Malay world (Liow, 2005). This can be seen clearly in the so-called 'Islamic films' (Van Heeren, 2009, 2012; Sasono, 2010, 2011; Paramadhita, 2010; Kim, 2010; Ida, 2010) which have followed the intrusion of Islamic pop culture in various Indonesian and Malaysian media (Wientrub, 2010). In addition, Islam has also become a yardstick to measure films not having a bad influence on the young generation and lead them to stray from religion. It should however be noted that Islam both in Indonesia and Malaysia is far from homogeneous and hegemonic as it is contested within these societies. The incorporation of Islam into Indonesian and Malaysian cinema has had to deal with the issue of multiculturalism. As a result, Islam both in Indonesia and Malaysia as reflected in contemporary pop culture is far from monolithic, militaristic and Middle-Eastern minded, but rather it signifies its dynamic, contested and performative nature (Weintraub, 2010).

Lastly, the fourth common ground is the migration within the Indo-Malay archipelago that has long been a feature of the interaction and exchange, and has defined the identity of the region from the pre-colonial period to the present, followed by the traffic of media images that permeate the borders between the two countries. The connected film industry of two countries with shared film audience allows for

developing similar narratives but with distinct local characteristics. Indonesian pop culture products (including film) not only serve Indonesian diasporas in Malaysia, but they have also been consumed by Malaysians within the Indo-Malay cultural proximity. In return, Indonesians consume Malaysian pop culture almost without cultural barriers which has simply proved the popular belief that both countries as “*bangsa serumpun*” (same kinship). Before the Indonesia-Malaysia confrontation (1962-1966), Indonesia had been lucrative market for Malaysian films and vice versa. For instance, in the early years (1938-1939), Indonesian films, such as *Terang Bulan* (Full Moon), *Alang-Alang* (Blady Grass), *Bengawan Solo*, *Kodok Tawa* (Laughing Frog) and *Gagak Hitam* (The Crow), were popular among Malaysians (Hussin, 1997, p. 13). After normalization of Indonesia and Malaysia relations, in 1982, both countries waived export restrictions allowing the importation of 10 films per year.⁵ Moreover, in the late 1980s, there was a Malaysian-Indonesian co-production in which the choice of story plots should portray the familial ties between people in both countries. The two film companies, Cipta Buah Sdn Bhd (Malaysia) and PT Kanta Indah (Indonesia) had jointly produced four films such as *Irisan-Irisan Hati* (Shreds of the Heart), *Bayi Tabung Uji* (In Vitro Fertilization), *Pertarungan Iblis Merah* (The Battle of the Red Devil) and *Dia Bukan Bayiku* (He Is Not My Baby). Other companies involved in Malaysia-Indonesia co-production were Pengedar Utama Sdn Bhd with their film *Bayangan Cinta* (The Shadow of Love), *Api Cemburu* (The Fire of Jealousy), Telefilm Sdn Bhd with *Pernikahan Berdarah* (Bloody Marriage) and *Sumpah Keramat* (Sacred Oath) and MV Production with *Melawan Takdir* (Against Fate) (Lim, 1989, pp.212-213). Although in the recent years, there is less formal initiative for film co-production between Indonesia and Malaysia, there are some collaborations on

⁵ The film trade (exchange) between Indonesia and Malaysia seems to be imbalanced. In the late 1980s many Indonesian films has flooded the Malaysian market and created a threat to local (Malay) film production. As film Malaysian film critic Baharudin Latif writes, “*Penonton-penonton Melayu seolah-olah mengikut rancangan yang telah dipersetujui secara sebulat suara menepikan filem-filem tempatan dan jatuh cinta dengan filem-filem Indonesia*” (Malay audience seem to follow a common consensus which push aside local/ Malay films to fall in love with Indonesian films) (Latif, 1983, p.31).

the level of individual initiatives between Indonesian and Malaysian artists in many film productions (i.e. Garin Nugroho's *Opera Jawa* (2006) and *Soegija* (2012), U-Wei Haji Saari's *Hanyut* (2012), Dain Said's *Bunohan* (2011)) due to similar artistic vision rather than inter-governmental motivation.

Taking into account the common ground of the Indo-Malay cinematic world along with *Reformasi* as a timeframe for an inter-reference approach, this study will fill the lacuna of "comparative studies" in cinema given the highly ethnocentric bias of film theory as pointed out by Paul Willemen (1994) which faces some difficulties to understand the functioning of non-Euro-American cinemas (Willemen, 2013). In the inter-referencing process, the national is not essentialized as a discrete entity but remains open for translation with multiple frames of reference of diverse locations. Moreover, although national cinema has been strongly questioned in today's globalization discourses in which national borders have become porous and penetrable, the national is still an important locus to understand the politics of cinema. In other words, "the issue of national cinema is then primarily a question of address, rather than a matter of the filmmaker's citizenship or even the film's country of origin (Willemen, 1994, p.212). However, Willemen reminds us that "a position of double outsidership, hybridity and in-between-ness is the precondition of any useful engagement with 'the national' in film culture" (Willemen, 1994, p.218). Thus, this study attempts to look at areas of overlaps and discontinuities by contextualizing and historicizing the development of contemporary Indonesian and Malaysian cinema rather than simply doing taxonomy of similarities and differences between two countries as a norm in conventional comparative studies. By discerning overlaps and discontinuities, this study may provide room for anomalies and contradictions rather than lock up the two countries in essentialist different national traits as can be found in the conventional model of comparative studies. Moreover, by employing an "inter-referencing" method, it "relaxes

the 'criteria' of comparison and examines what may be called 'affinities' between locations where the suggested relationship between the referred locations does not imply a direct comparison, but refers to something more elusive" (Chua, 2014, p. 274). Since any attempt to set a fixed element of comparison might be unhelpful to accommodate the huge differences between Indonesia and Malaysia, the looser conceptualization of inter-referencing could illuminate how one location might have learned from its referred other. Therefore, the inter-referencing approach encourages discovering "newness" from the two different locations or fields (Indonesian and Malaysian cinema) through a constant process of interaction, transaction, translation or circulation rather rendering analysis from a fixed and "universal" model.

Locating Indonesian and Malaysian Cinema in Southeast Asia

In order to gain a better conceptualization of the position of Indonesian and Malaysian cinema, it is useful to take into account Jacques Ranciere's (2004) idea of "part of no part" as new politics of visibility which might shed a light on today's conditions of cinemas in these two countries. As I will later show, such a theoretical approach complemented by inter-referencing can better illuminate how cinema actively contributes to the process of enlarging public sphere and ceaselessly displaces the limits of public and the private, social and the political in both Malaysia and Indonesia, two countries which are plagued by growing religious conservatism and threats to individual and religious freedoms. While Indonesian and Malaysian cinemas still refer to national problems in the national framing, they cannot be understood merely as neither an allegory of the national nor a reflection of national culture. Rather, using Ranciere's (2004) idea of "part of no part," they are part of continuing struggles for democratic equality within a plural society. This conceptualization might overcome the limitations of past studies on Asian and Southeast Asian cinema as will be critically

discussed in this section.

This section suggests that Southeast Asian cinemas are rather less known or overlooked in most Western cinema studies and they are usually hidden in the larger discourse of Asian cinema. Meanwhile, a handful studies on Southeast Asian cinemas tend to emphasize cultural traits or specificities of “national cinema” in the region, but unfortunately they lack reference of other neighboring country as well as a conceptual unity in illustrating the conditions of Southeast Asian cinemas. In particular, some notable studies on Southeast Asian cinema (including Indonesian and Malaysian cinema) are still confined to national territoriality discourses. Taking into account the problematic notion of “national cinema,” my study seeks to conceptualize Indonesian and Malaysian cinema through constant mutual referencing or translating process between two countries that transcend a national space as they not only share cultural, linguistic and geographical affinities but also experience rather similar political dilemmas and upheavals. This will help to explore a conceptual unity as well as to identify shared features of Southeast Asian cinema by avoiding a cataloguing of the region based on specific national traits, but rather to remain open with the possibilities of political and cultural confluence among countries in the region in an increasingly globalized world.

In general, Southeast Asian cinemas are discussed scantily under the rubric of Asian cinema. As a result, much works on Southeast Asian cinema tend to simplify (generalize) and paint a very broad picture, which gloss over some differences among countries in the region. Lee Server's *Asian Pop Cinema* (1999) probably is a typical textual example of Asian cinema that allocates one brief chapter of Southeast Asian cinema (only 3 pages out of a total of 132 pages). Server briefly discusses some popular films from Thailand and Vietnam, but dedicates only one brief chapter about the cinema of the Philippines followed by interviews with Filipino film director Eddie Romero and

scriptwriter Jose Lacaba. Meanwhile, Dimitris Eleftheriotis' and Gary Needham's edited volume *Asian Cinemas* (2006) which is intended as a reader and guide to Asian cinema completely neglects Southeast Asian cinema as it only discusses some films from several Asian countries such as Turkey, Japan, India, Mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. These volumes perhaps reflect the fact that cinema studies in the Western countries still pay little attention to Southeast Asian cinema or perhaps they are simply reluctant to comprehend and delineate the complexities of cinema from the region.

Unlike mainstream Western cinema studies, two edited books started paying more serious attention to Southeast Asian cinema. The first book entitled *Being & Becoming: The Cinema of Asia* (2002) edited by Aruna Vasudev, Latika Padgaonkar and Rashmi Doraiswamy is quite comprehensive in covering Asian cinema, including Southeast Asian cinemas and even lesser-known cinemas in Central Asia. Meanwhile, a second book entitled *Contemporary Asian Cinema* edited by Teresa Ciecko (2006) offers the more detailed picture of contemporary Southeast Asian cinema since there are five chapters dedicated to the cinema in the Philippines, Vietnam, Thailand, Singapore and Indonesia. In these chapters, each writer discusses the contemporary development of cinema in certain Southeast Asian countries in terms of film industry, popular genre and government policies. While these volumes provide the more detailed picture of Southeast Asian cinema for the outsiders or general readers, who have little knowledge of cinema in this region, they still locate Southeast Asian cinema under the big banner of Asian cinema and do not really engage with the distinct characteristics of Southeast Asian cinema. Clearly, there is no attempt to look at any possibilities of political and cultural interplays among cinema in the region and discussing critically the potent political power of cinema except its role as a container of national culture.

Meanwhile, more specific studies on Southeast Asian cinema appeared in three edited volumes (Lacaba, 2000; Hanan, 2001; Margirier & Gimenez, 2012) presenting

detailed illustration of Southeast Asian cinema in respective countries. *The Films of ASEAN* (Association of Southeast Asian Nations, 2000) edited by Jose Lacaba aims at providing a panorama of diverse development of cinema in seven member-countries of ASEAN in 2000: Brunei Darussalam, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. As Lacaba suggests, the cinema landscape in those seven countries is “buffeted by the contradicting winds of globalization and decolonization, trade liberalization and nationalist protectionism, censorship and democratization” (p. xii). It seems clear from this volume that there has been a little interaction among ASEAN film industries in the past while in the present, the interaction is almost absent outside of occasional film festivals. Likewise, a volume edited by David Hanan (2001) offers a broader view of cinema in seven Southeast Asian countries (Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, Philippines, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam) and two countries from the Pacific (Australia and New Zealand). A similar tendency can be found in a dual-language (French and English) volume *Southeast Asian Cinema* (2012) edited by Gaetan Margirier and Jean-Pierre Gimenez that presents Southeast Asian cinema in a series of distinct national contexts. Since these edited volumes on Southeast Asian Cinema focus on the history of cinema from individual countries, they tend to be both chronological and evolutionary in format. Although these volumes have provided the intellectual scaffolding to help construct the Southeast Asian cinema, they lack an exploration of the conceptual unity in framing cinema in the region. As a result, cinemas in Southeast Asia seem to be isolated and sporadic across the region as they are locked up in their confined national space and enclosed within their own national cultural identity.

Recently, there has been an interesting shift in the study of Southeast Asian cinema from commercial to independent cinema (Baumgärtel, 2012; Ingawanij & McKay, 2012; Lim & Yamamoto, 2012). The new interest of Southeast Asian independent

cinema is definitely inseparable from the spread and accessibility of digital technology that bring democratization and liberalization of film production. It is also caused by the international recognition of independent films from the region in the global film festival circuit and its associated channels for film funding. However, with few exceptions of transnational studies on the “piracy generation” and “evolution of digital cinema,” both volumes are still surprisingly cast in restricted national frameworks of analysis rather than in a regional perspective. Although digital technology has been acknowledged as an impetus for the independent film movement in Southeast Asia, the discussion of digital aesthetics is almost absent. Moreover, there is no substantial discussion of cultural interaction and confluence among independent films in Southeast Asia.

Meanwhile, the relationship between cinema and politics has been a central theme in early studies of Indonesian cinema (Said, 1991; Heider, 1991; Sen, 1994). However, they tend to focus on the politics of the dominant group (state and its apparatus) or the nature of the existing political regime in the framework of state-civil society relationship but disregarding the other political agencies outside the state. More recently, however, studies of Indonesian cinema (Van Heeren, 2009, 2012; Barker, 2011) have shifted the focus to dynamics between religious and secular groups within Indonesian society, and the forces of the market and pop culture. While Van Heeren’s and Barker’s studies have offered fresh approaches to study Indonesian cinema beyond the conventional state-centered framework, they are less interested in exploring the political potential of cinema as an agency or force of change in Indonesian society. Rather, they are still wholly occupied by the way various non-state actors mobilize cinema for the sake of their own interest as many previous studies on Indonesian cinema had done before.

Salim Said’s *Shadow on the Silver Screen, A Social History of Indonesian Film* (1991) and Heider’s *Indonesian Cinema, National Culture on Screen* (1991) employ different

perspectives in examining the nature of Indonesian culture and politics as being represented in Indonesian (mainstream) cinema. While Said's study uses a social history perspective in discussing the chronological development of Indonesian cinema from colonial period to the New Order era, Heider's study employs an anthropological perspective to argue that Indonesian cinema reflects the various traits (patterns) of Indonesian national culture that makes Indonesian movies "profoundly Indonesian" (p.7). These studies tend to stop at treating cinema as allegories of society in which there are hidden conditions of national significance and form that run parallel to the wider circumstances of the nation. The obvious problem of these two studies is viewing Indonesian cinema that resembles the discourses and forces that constitutes the circumstances for the national and it merely reflects the nation state.

As a landmark study of Indonesian cinema during the New Order era, Krishna Sen's (1994) study suggests that the state is a determining factor that shapes the institutional and textual practices of Indonesian cinema. Under the draconian state regulation (control) and state-sponsored film institutions, Indonesian cinema became an instrument to restore order and curb any political dissent in a hegemonic way. Not surprisingly, through film narrative, the ideology of ordered society is promoted and any social conflicts repressed or restored. The obsession of Suharto's militaristic regime over order and control not only led to the creation of state-sponsored (corporatist) film institutions or organizations, but it also gave rise to a formulaic narrative structure "that move[s] from order through disorder to restoration of the order" (Sen, 1994, p.159) in both filmic images and narratives on issues such as poverty, social class, and role of women in society. Hence, according to Sen, cinema is "the most 'ordered' space" of the New Order's mediascape.

While Sen's study might be true in explaining some institutional (structural) constraints in film production and certain forms of cinematic representations under

Suharto's authoritarian regime, it seems that her study may be more useful to understand the nature of Indonesian state and politics, especially during Suharto's New Order. This is because Indonesian cinema is understood as a passive mirror of Indonesian politics and an object of state control (domination) rather than an active agency in Indonesian politics. Like Hieder's study above, Sen's study treats cinema as political allegory of the Suharto's authoritarian regime. Clearly, Sen's study tends to over-emphasise the State's power and overlooks spaces of political resistance (struggles) in Indonesian cinema. Although Sen argues that "film is political," she tends to conceptualize the political in terms of state and society relationship marked by the domination of state's power over society. Consequently, politics has been understood as both extension and intensification of state power that embraces many aspects of Indonesian society. The problem with this understanding is that it tends to gloss over the capacity of society to resist/ contest against the power of state or existing political regime. Furthermore, it also tends to overlook various forms of everyday politics related to the cinema, but instead submits to the power of formal (state) political institutions in Indonesia.

In a recent study of Indonesian cinema during the *Reformasi* era, Katinka van Heeren (2009; 2012) explores the impact of discourses and film mediation practices on the production of collective identities and social realities within the shifting political and cultural frames of the Indonesian nation. Framing "film as social practice," Van Heeren argues that Indonesian cinema has facilitated the daily experiences and engagements with audio-visual media. Film policy and normative discourse on film formats and genres led to imaginings of local, national and transnational identities which were not restricted to national political and economic power relations. However, Van Heeren's analysis on narrative practices in the post-Suharto audio-visual media is tied to "a struggle over who and what shape and decide on national popular discourse and the

realities of imaginations of society daily-lived practices" (p.143).

Although van Heeren's study identifies some "oppositional cinema" practices within the so-called "Islamic" film and independent film communities, she tends to perceive Islam as a "political tool" as well as a defining factor in the contemporary Indonesian public sphere. Furthermore, she argues that the rise of Islam in the public sphere unveils tensions between secularism and religion over media (including film) resources, access, management, and audio-visual representations of society. The opposition between secularism and religion is problematic as a characteristic attributed to the contemporary discourse in contemporary Indonesian cinema. In fact, so-called "religious" groups (mostly Muslim groups) have built up an alliance with the state (censor apparatus) to promote more strict film censorship, while "secular" groups as represented by non-governmental organizations as well as people in film industry are not only concerned with the issue of freedom of expression or civil rights but also the economic (commercial) interests of film industry.

Moreover, van Heeren does not make a clear distinction between film controversy and film censorship or what she calls "censorship from the street." She tends to equate all objections to film as calls for censorship, thus placing them squarely in opposition to the freedom of speech. In this way, her frame of censorship is too limiting for a broad discourse on film that has provoked vocal and critical responses from various segments of society. Her study does not discuss what the controversies are about, how they operate, and what they mean to broader Indonesian society. As a result, the complexity of controversial films is often neglected, especially the nature of polemics or debates and voices which emerged from different segments of society. Overcoming Heeren's limited approach, the subsequent study shifts its focus to the cultural economy of contemporary Indonesian cinema in order to gain a better understanding of the character of Indonesian film industry and some popular genre cinema.

Unlike Heeren's study, Thomas Barker's (2011) study looks at the economic aspect of Indonesian film industry, which tends to be eschewed by most political-centered approach of Indonesian cinema studies, although the economy shapes the genre films produced. Deploying a cultural industry approach, Barker's study focuses on the revitalization of Indonesian feature film production (driven by the young filmmakers) and the consequences of films becoming pop culture. Barker argues that Indonesian films have shifted from state control or under the domain of cultural economy of national cinema, to the market with prevailing modes of pop culture. As a result, the film industry is "more open but at the same time less predictable" (p. 283). Furthermore, he suggests that while young filmmakers become an important creative force for the contemporary Indonesian film industry, they were not quite successful in changing the structure of film production and distribution and government film policy (particularly film censorship), instead they were deeply ingrained within the pop culture realm. Consequently, there are only two options available for filmmakers: using the global film festival as their means to gain cultural capital or engaging with the mode of production of the commercial film industry.

While Barker's study has identified some notable young filmmakers who play a pivotal role in revitalizing the film industry with their fresh and creative approaches, it tends to underplay the political significance and resonance of their works in articulating current social and political issues as well as projecting social imagery in the new socio-political landscape. This is perhaps due to his study being limited to films released in commercial film theatres; hence, it overlooks independent films and documentaries circulating outside the commercial circuit. Although the young filmmakers were unsuccessful in changing the government policy on film censorship in their appeal to the Indonesian Constitutional Court (*Mahkamah Konstitusi*), nonetheless they were constantly pushing the boundaries of "conventional" social norms and taboos by

exercising artistic freedom to express political concerns. In addition, studying films through a pop culture perspective can help avoid the bias of studying films as mere “national cinema” and creating artificial divisions between “art” and “commercial” cinema (i.e. horror, Islamic films). That said, framing film within pop culture might also run the risk of trivializing the political and social resonance of films.

Indeed, the role of state power in shaping cinema discourses and practices is not limited to the Indonesian context but it also can be found in the Malaysian context. Several writings offer sociological perspective of Malaysian cinema and Malaysian identity (i.e. Khan, 1997; Hussin, 1997; Van der Heide, 2002). In particular, although William Van der Heide’s *Malaysian Cinema, Asian Cinema* (2002) is laudable as it attempts to place Malaysian cinema within the rubric of other global influences, it only deals very superficially with Malaysian culture and identity. Moreover, Van der Heide’s book fails to dissect film studies with an understanding of Malaysian culture and politics of identity. Likewise, Hatta Azad Khan’s *Malay Cinema* tends to be preoccupied with the idea that Malay cinema fits within the theories of national cinema or “Third Cinema,”⁶ but it seems less critical of the inflection of capitalism in Malay (mainstream) films as well as the presence of state control through film censorship which shapes film narrative.

In her study on Malaysian cinema in the 1990s, Khoo Gaik Cheng (1999, 2006) argues the revival of *adat* (Malay custom) in textual film production was parallel to the intensification of Islamization process in the socio-political arena. She calls Malaysian

⁶ The phrase “third cinema” should not be mistaken with the phrase “cinema in the third worlds.” The latter phrase is used to characterize the conditions of cinema in the developing countries (Asia, Africa and Latin America) in contrast to the advanced development of cinema in European and North American countries, which tends to have bias of hegemonic modernization theory. Meanwhile, the phrase “the third cinema” was first coined by two Argentine filmmakers Fernando Solanas and Octavio Gettino (see, Nichols, 1976; Stam & Miller, 2000). They argue for “third cinema” distinct from both “first cinema” (Hollywood and its imitators) and “second cinema” (European art film). “Third cinema” was to be socially critical and politically active that took form as a guerilla cinema deriving inspiration from Frantz Fanon and strongly linked with anti-imperialist struggles which marked the 1960s and 1970s. In the context of Malaysia, Khoo (2006) argues Malay cinema fits loosely to the “first cinema” as it tends to be depoliticized and more entertainment-oriented because “its structure, language and commercial motivations are modeled after Bombay Hindi cinema” (p.97).

cinema a “Cinema of Denial” which “is facilitated by self-censorship and state-censorship whereby suppressive state measures such as the Internal Security Act serves to maintain a general atmosphere of repression in which filmmakers avoid portraying current social realities that might be deemed sensitive to national unity or critical of the government” (Khoo, 2006, p.83). She further argues that while the recuperation of *adat* in the “Cinema of Denial” is a way of resisting Arabicization and asserting Malay indigenous identity, it also denies or excludes the customs of non-Malays, due to the political sensitivity portraying the cultures and religions of other ethnic groups in Malaysia. In the recuperation of *adat* in cinema, however, Islam seems to be a determining factor in defining the Malay collective identity. Not surprisingly, anti-Islamic elements have become a popular target for censors since the *dakwah* (Muslim proselytizing) movement began popularizing a resurgence of Islam in Malaysia in the 1970s.

While Khoo has identified the revival of *adat* as cultural forces behind the Malay(sian) cinematic representations, the relationship between film and Islam is less clear and rather underdeveloped in her argument. Moreover, when it comes to the censorship practice, *adat* seems to disappear and replaced by the Islamic values, particularly in the representations of female sexuality. Though she acknowledges there were some attempts from Malaysian filmmakers to test the blurry boundaries of *adat* and Islam, the position of *adat* vis a vis Islam is still unclear. Instead, filmmakers should find “a fine balance between Islam, *adat* and modernity” (Khoo, 2006, p.109). However, issues of sexuality, liberalism and primordialism as represented in Malaysian cinema are not clarified as to whether they are an unconscious or deliberate reclamation of *adat*. In other words, Khoo does not elaborate the intricate relationship between *adat*, Islam and modernity but instead dwells on the Malay cultural landscape since she tends to bypass some films made by Malaysian Chinese and Indians and only focuses on ‘*bumigeois*’ or

new Malay filmmakers.

Although Khoo argues that a “Cinema of Denial” erases the “multi” from Malaysian multiculturalism and focuses largely on the wealthy urban Malay population (even as it ironically caters to a lower-income audience), her critique of a “Cinema of Denial” has a middle-class, if not cultural elitist, bias. This is because a “Cinema of Denial” (or mainstream Malaysian cinema), Khoo argues, is “not only fostered by the state but also by its audience, which is trained to desire nothing more than entertainment and fantasy rather than critical cinema” (emphasis added, Khoo, 2006, p.123). Unfortunately, the emergence of independent filmmaking outside the commercial circuit was only discussed very briefly in Khoo’s study as oppositional forces to the state-sanctioned “national Malaysian cinema” in terms of style, content, genre, ethnic representation and production method. Moreover, Khoo’s attribution to independent cinema as “postmodern (or cosmopolitan)” in contrast to “national cinema” is rather problematic. Although most independent filmmakers have made references to some “global” cinemas and they have exhibited their works beyond national boundaries, they still use some domestic (national) issues as their source of creativity and an avenue to carve out their own identity as Malaysian. Thus, the idea of national cinema has not completely disappeared in the globalization process; rather, it takes a “new position” in textual production (cinematic representation).

Expanding on aforementioned works, my study looks beyond state power, social allegories, binary opposition of secularism and Islam, capitalism and pop culture, and explores other emerging, as well as, repressed political power in a process of the making marginal groups visible and audible through cinematic images that might disturb the unjust order in society. Moreover, political antagonism as manifested in film controversies will be scrutinized through a systematic study rather than simply mapped onto a conflict between “secularism” and “religion” (Islam) as postulated in van

Heeren's study and which is less explored in Khoo's and Barker's study. It should be noted that while globalization has made the nation-state stand on its one leg, the national is still very much relevant as a unit of study since cinema has "capacity to give figurative form to imagined community" (Ingawanij, 2012, p.11). It forms part of the cultural struggle through its mediating capacity to represent collective identities, dreams, anxieties and desires in ways corresponding to differing political positions and conflicting ideological persuasions. Moreover, government policy, film censorship and audiences still crucially shape how filmmakers construct particular cinematic representation and practice. Nevertheless, cinema does not simply communicate through specularized representation since cinema cannot be considered simply as national projection or identity. Therefore, as Ingawanij (2012, p.12) suggests, "when we think through the relationship between the national and cinema, it is important to stress the connection between aesthetics and dynamic of spectatorial address: how certain works contain signifying or sensuous elements that evoke shared horizons of experience." In this regard, my study looks at Indonesian and Malaysian cinemas not as a singular and unitary national cinema, but, rather, they are complex configurations of social representations and fantasies with unresolved tensions between nationalistic imagination and local ramification which can in turn influence the way audiences comprehend the idea of Indonesia and Malaysia. Hence, films are seen as both a product and a force of change in contemporary Indonesia and Malaysia rather than simply a subject to the state's control or social censorship of religious and conservative groups in society.

Conceptual Framework: Cinema and Politics

While much has been written about the relationship between cinema and politics (i.e. Downing, 1987; Ryan & Kellner, 1988; Jameson, 1992; Combs, 1993; Wayne, 2001;

Davies & Wells, 2002; Franklin, 2006; Shapiro, 2009; Kellner, 2010; Rushton, 2013), they tend to confine cinema to the issue of cinematic representations and governmental policies on cinema within a political ideology or cultural governance framework. As a result, they are incapable of capturing new politics emerging from cinema amidst unprecedented political and technological upheavals. Steering away from the trajectories of past analyses, my study frames cinema as a form of new politics which is able to broaden a horizon of possibilities through images and gestures by making visible and audible those who have been marginalized and discriminated or uncounted for within a plural society. Here, I have been inspired primarily by Jacques Rancière's (2004) idea of "parts of no part" and "distribution of the sensible" to look at the way Indonesian and Malaysian filmmakers deal with the marginal in terms of social, cultural, political or spatial and create the perceptual conditions for a political community and its dissensus. In an equal way, Alain Badiou's (2005) idea of art (aesthetics) and politics also has inspired me to explore the capability of cinema to speak to (generic) humanity and to establish such a politico-artistic "we."

Like many contemporaries, Rancière and Badiou have come to view art and politics as entwined. The political aspect of art lies not on the visible act of creation (through radical novelty), but rather in the way that it creates a new kind of collectivity or an anonymous inclusion based on absolute equality. Thus, it is useful to locate cinema within the larger discourse on aesthetics and politics as articulated by Badiou (2005) and Rancière (2004). Against pessimism in contemporary postmodernist discourses on the political potential of art and aesthetics, the philosopher Alain Badiou instead recovers the potentiality of art, which includes film, for progressive social change.⁷ In the Indonesian and Malaysian contexts, heated public debates, mass protests

⁷ In the 1990s, the robust debates on the social relevance of artistic works marked the art scene. One of the exponents of these debates was Nicolas Bourriaud (2002) who coined the term 'relational aesthetics' (*esthétique relationnel*) to illustrate the tendency of art works to dwell in the

and calls for boycotts against cinema undoubtedly show how cinema is able to evoke people's sensibility on social issues suggesting that cinema may be a catalyst and conduit of social change. Such responses suggest that cinema is more than mere images but rather is an art that not only demands looking/ watching but which also "rework[s] the frame of our perceptions and the dynamism of our affects" (Rancière, 2009, p.82). Similarly, according to Giorgio Agamben, "In the cinema, a society that has lost its gesture tries at once to reclaim what it has lost and to record that loss" (Agamben, 2000, p.52). Nonetheless, as equally noted by Levitt (2008, p.208) cinema is not equivalent to the technical-social scene of the moving picture; rather, it is "a kind of impersonal eye, a perceptual modality, a kinesthetic sense, a social milieu" (Levitt, 2008, p. 208).

Therefore, as an art form cinema establishes an anonymous collectivism as well as activates audiences' imagination which may breach the divide between abstract equality and real fraternity. As Badiou points out, "The question of art today is a question of political emancipation"(as cited in Ling, 2011, p.173). In the broader context, art constitutes, as Badiou explains, "a real possibility to create something new against the abstract universality that is globalization" (Ling, 2011, p.174). In step with this, Rancière (2004) points out that the aesthetics dimension is inherent in any radical emancipatory politics. Rancière suggests, art, of which includes film, is political not because of any content or "message," but in virtue of the way in which it reconfigures or intervenes in the "economy of the sensible." Here, art is part and parcel of the "distribution (partition) of the sensible" (*le partage du sensible*) and makes visible and audible what previously had no part of the whole society. While Badiou's and Rancière's idea of art as a site for progressive social change has inspired many studies, their

human interaction and its social context rather than asserting private symbolic space. However, Claire Bishop (2004) criticizes that the relations set up by the relational aesthetics are not intrinsically democratic since they rest too comfortably within an ideal of subjectivity as whole and community as immanent togetherness. Hence, she introduces the term the 'relational antagonism' in which the work of art sustains a tension among viewers, participants and context by exposing what is repressed in maintaining a social harmony.

application in the case of Indonesia and Malaysia requires some fine tuning of their arguments. In the Indonesian and Malaysian contexts, film has clearly liberating but also limiting dimensions. At one level, the Indonesian and Malaysian states have attempted to aestheticize politics by using symbolic processes/representations to disseminate the state ideology and sustain the political order. At another level, art workers (activists) struggle to politicize art so as transform society and criticize the state. It can be argued that cinema is a strategic site in reconfiguring the inequality of “distribution of the sensible” that establishes hierarchy between those who know and those who do not know, between those who provide good interpretations and those who passively look on. Undoubtedly, cinema embodies emerging politics in which an equal social order and sensibility can be established through cinematic images and gestures.

The potent political force of cinema, particularly its connection to the masses, has been postulated by the French leading philosopher Alain Badiou (2005) and even several years before by critical theorists such as Walter Benjamin (2002). For Badiou (2005), as a form of “mass art” which embodies “democratizing function”, cinema is a medium that reaches the general public. Hence, cinema has a great potential to establish an alternative public sphere (or what French filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard calls a “fantasized democratic space”) particularly given the capacity of cinema to be a site of discursive contestation where meanings are made, circulated, negotiated and challenged. In this way, cinema is able to offer a counter point to the dominant discourse and disturb people’s comfortable view of the world through its powerful narrative and images. This makes cinema a potent political force that challenges and disrupts (destabilizes) existing social imaginary by exposing to the audience an “unimaginable” world altering the world they live in. As Walter Benjamin argues, film “comes towards this form of perception by virtue of its shock effects” (2002, p.269). In the contexts of Indonesia and Malaysia, cinema, especially with accessible filmmaking technology and

dissemination, can become an alternative critical but also oppressive space when compared to conventional public sphere, which in these two countries, been captured and dominated by conservative and dominant political groups beyond the state power.

Cinema is able to project fantasy with both utopian and dystopian imagery to induce desire for (political) emancipation and control beyond formal politics and the traditional public sphere. Pertaining to the political, cinema signals a “coming society,” which does not exist yet but rather persists alongside the actual society. At the same time, cinema also serves as a fantasy construction that unifies and makes possible our everyday notion of reality.⁸ As Slavoj Žižek famously says in the opening scene of the documentary, *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema* (dir. Sophie Fiennes, 2006), “Cinema doesn't give you what you desire; it tells you how to desire.” In other words, the ideological fantasy in cinema teaches us how to desire, keeps our desire alive and even constitutes our desire. However, by representing the unimaginable, cinema destabilizes existing/dominant perceptions of the world. As a result, cinematic representations can sometimes make people feel uncomfortable and in the process evoke controversies. Hence, in the context of authoritarian regimes like Suharto's Indonesia and Mahathir's Malaysia, cinematic representations of alternative subjectivities, whether critical or otherwise, create a new site of symbolic politics at a historical juncture when spaces for resistance are often lacking, suppressed, or tightly controlled.

Here, it is useful to draw on the concept of “antagonism” by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. Laclau and Mouffe (1985) had introduced the concept of “antagonism” in the robust debates of the prospect of democratic culture in the Western countries. They wage criticism against the politics of liberalism which negates the ineradicable

⁸ I align Walter Benjamin's dialectical optics with Slavoj Žižek's (1997) argument that fantasy functions as a framework that constitutes, organizes and saturates the experience of the historical world. Rather than an illusory category that operates apart from real conditions or as a mask that conceals power relations, the fantasies in political representations are an actual social force that drives and shapes “a fictional reality” through scenes of desire and narrative plot form.

character of antagonism. To them, a fully functioning democracy is not one where all antagonisms have disappeared, but one in which new political frontiers are constantly being drawn and brought into debate. In other words, democratic society is one where relations of conflict are sustained, not erased. Without antagonism there is only an imposed consensus of authoritarian order—a total suppression of debate and discussion, which is inimical to democracy. Further, Mouffe (2002; 2005) argues that democratic politics should be able to grasp the pluralistic nature of the social world, with the conflicts that pluralism entails; conflict for which no radical solution ever exists. As a result, democracy is an open-ended process, and thus perpetually amenable to disruption and renewal. Put another way, democracy is not simply a form of government or an institution, but rather a moment marking the practice of politics itself; and that democratic politics is oriented towards the contestation of prevailing regimes of cultural intelligibility.

Viewed from the perspective of democracy, cinema produces and circulates images (often of the unseen or invisible subjects) in the social configuration that becomes continuous source of disagreement among different social groups. Here, it is perhaps useful to further consider the Rancière's (1999) term "disagreement" (*mésentente*) or "dissensus." Disagreement always emerges since modern politics can only secure a minimal order of human interaction rather than being able to effect deep and durable changes in its quest for world salvation. More specifically, Rancière remarks that disagreement is:

[A] determined kind of speech situation: one in which one of the interlocutors at once understands and does not understand what the other is saying. Disagreement is not the conflict between one who says white and the other says black. It is the conflict between one who says white and another who also says white but does not understand the same thing in the name of whiteness (Rancière, 1999, p.x).

However, for Rancière, "political dissensus is not a discussion between speaking people who would confront their interests and values. It is a conflict about who speaks

and who does not speak, about what has to be heard as the voice of pain and what has to be heard as an argument on justice" (2011, p.2). Therefore, in order to understand the unresolved antagonism between two opposing groups (liberal democrat and religious conservative) within Indonesian and Malaysian society, I find the idea "phatic communication" particularly useful. The concept of "phatic communication" introduced by the structuralist linguist Roman Jakobson as the use of language to maintain social relation through ritualized formula such as greeting, chit-chat on the weather and niceties of social communication (Žižek, 2008). The phatic function is close to the "meta-linguistic" function: it checks whether the channel is working. Applying the phatic communication into social antagonism (as well as in the case of controversy surrounding film) in the Indonesian and Malaysian society, the two opposing groups can be understood as testing cinema as the channel with the code itself. While religious conservative group attempts to control cinema in order to demonstrate their presence and exercises its power in curbing the destructive (negative) effects of cinema, the liberal democrat group treats cinema as a medium for its artistic expression and social concerns without any restrictions, in order to articulate its identity and make a better society. These contrasting (conflicting) groups treat cinema as a powerful medium that is able to shape people's mind and behavior. Understandably, the two groups do not intent to conduct a conversation or dialogue, but rather they attempt to exert their presence and to be recognized by choosing cinema as a site of encountering the other.

Although Laclau's and Mouffe's idea of "antagonism" within democratic politics and Rancière's political thought of "disagreement" or "dissensus" emerged from Western-liberal contexts, their ideas remain useful as a conceptual framework for explicating Malaysian and Indonesian situations of political suppression, whereby a public sphere is barely in existence. In the context of *Reformasi* in Indonesia and Malaysia, political antagonism was expressed in the creative fields such as visual and

performing arts (including films). Many political actors have attempted to use artistic spaces to articulate dissenting political views, ideologies and identities. In the context of art activism in Indonesia and Malaysia during the 1990s, Sumit K Mandal suggests that “art workers have been democratizing the framing of the arts as well as producing aesthetic engagements that are democratic” (2003, p. 203). As a result, politics is not only inscribed within film narratives or cinematic representations which provide spaces for political participation, critique and endorsement but also by the political activism of filmmakers and film audience who actively consolidate or resist their allocated places in society or who refuse to be politically silenced.

However, the politics created by cinema and the controversies generated in Indonesia and Malaysia cannot be simply explained by the liberal understanding of civil society. This is because the liberal concept of civil society tends to overlook those who are not counted as members of existing civil society (“the parts who have no part”) and being excluded and discriminated. While the liberal concept tends not to see things in religious and ethnic terms, it has a bias of educated middle class along with voluntary social organizations that disregard the presence of underclass (poor people) or illegal dwellers in an urban area. In particular, such liberal concept disregards an internal antagonism within civil society which does not necessarily lead to any dialogue process as pointed out by the concept of “phatic communication.” For instance, poor people living in the slum area are not only the subject of contemporary filmic representations, but, at the same time they are an object of political mobilization (i.e. Islamic Defenders Front or FPI) as a counter force against liberal and secular groups in society. Most importantly, the liberal concept of civil society tends to neglect the driving force of transient and marginalized (subaltern) groups in shaping democratic transformations in the third world as these groups are often not dominant, fluid, and socially visible. Taking postcolonial India as his case study, Partha Chatterjee (2004) introduces the term

“political society” as a more appropriate concept to capture such an emerging political space of struggle located between state and civil society. Like poor and marginal people in India, in Indonesia and Malaysia those marginalized people (transgenders, illegal dwellers, prostitutes, mobs, criminals) are located outside state and civil society as they are less defined groups yet quite visible but not the usual members of civil society.

Appreciating Chatterjee’s attempt to create a nuanced category of political society, Kuan Hsing Chen (2010) endorses the need to not use civil society as a normative category in social political analyses. He urges that we should seek for useful analytical categories which can help us to “not blindly invest in the civil society sector, but to support subaltern struggles in the political society, which may involve ignoring civil society, opposing it, or working with it” (Chen, 2010, p.233). Thus, it is important to map strategically emerging political forces and alliances and their novel relationships, patterns/nature and strategies of politics. Here, the politics of films and political struggles around film narratives provide us with an instance of emerging politics in Malaysia and Indonesia whereby the nature of politics, alliances, strategies and goals remain ambiguous and under-explored. Finally, taking into account the perplexity and paradox of contemporary conditions of Indonesian and Malaysian society, cinema is a truly vibrant conduit to express those complexities as well as perhaps offer new possibilities or new ways of living or social arrangements.

Methodology and Fieldwork

Studying social and political change in Indonesia and Malaysia, as Heryanto and Mandal suggest, “requires flexibility and a dialectics of a scale greater than often allowed in the familiar orthodoxy of positivist political science and sociology” (2003, p.13). This needs an approach which gives specific historical content to various categories (such as control, conflicts, controversy, and so on) and elaborates on “the

singularity of events and processes” (Philpott, 2000, p.7). This study uses *Reformasi* as a point of departure to investigate the politics of and around cinema yet taking into account the historical conditions in which cinema opens up new passages towards new form of cultural politics. In addition, by employing an inter-referencing method *Reformasi* is an apt object of investigation as “there was no doubt that Malaysians and Indonesians shared similar personal and/ or collective sentiments towards their respective governments, which facilitated the border crossing of the symbolic concept across the two contiguous territories” (Chua, 2014, p. 285). Thus, the inter-referencing method will facilitate me to study the unfolding understanding of democracy in Indonesia and Malaysia as it struggles between diverse groups crossing borders, politics and aesthetics in which special meanings unfold as they circulate and flow across and within different non-Western or Asian contexts. With the inter-referencing method in mind, I conducted fieldwork in Indonesia and Malaysia and later closely analyzed filmic representations of selected films.

I conducted my fieldwork in Jakarta (Indonesia) from 2 October to 29 December 2011 and in Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia) from 2 January to 28 February 2012. In order to yield rich data from my fieldwork in both countries, I combined several methods of data gathering such as in-depth interviews, participant observation, and archival research. I did some in-depth interviews with 32 informants in Indonesia and 23 informants in Malaysia who are involved both directly and indirectly in the film industry and independent film scene (such as film directors, producers, indie film distributor, festival organizers, film critics, members of film censorship, religious leaders and social activists). I was quite fortunate during my fieldwork in Indonesia and Malaysia as I was able to attend as well as observe some film festivals (local, national and international) and film events (film preview, film club discussion, symposium). In order to obtain more information on discourses and debates surrounding particular films and to keep

abreast on recent developments in the film industry, I conducted archival research in the Indonesian Film Archive (*Sinematek Indonesia*) and National Library of Malaysia (*Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia*).

It should be clear from the outset that I have been involved in the Indonesian film scene, particularly in the independent film community, since early 2000 in various ways (festival jury member, festival organizer and observer) and had already built up a cordial relationship with Malaysian independent filmmakers prior to my fieldwork due to my role as director of the Jogja-NETPAC⁹ Asian Film Festival (JAFF). As part of jury member and jury president of some independent film festivals (i.e. Yogyakarta Documentary Film Festival, Konfiden Short Film Festival), I had a great opportunity to keep abreast of the development of independent film in Indonesia. Meanwhile, as director of JAFF (from 2006 to present), I had an opportunity to meet and exchange ideas with young and independent filmmakers across Southeast Asia. In particular, since its inception, the festival was intended as a meeting point for independent filmmakers across Indonesia. At the same time, JAFF had facilitated me to open up more contacts to Malaysian independent filmmakers (such as the late Yasmin Ahmad, Ho Yuhang, Amir Muhammad and Azharr Rudin) and to keep abreast of the development of Malaysian independent film. In particular, in 2007 JAFF held a special program on “Malaysian New Wave” in which we invited the late Yasmin Ahmad and Ho Yuhang as festival guests and speakers in our seminar and public lecture, while a year before we had invited Amir Muhammad and Azharr Rudin as festival guest and juror respectively. Thus, this festival has built up an alternative network of independent filmmakers, film critics, social activists and film communities and allowed those who have participated in the festival to exchange their knowledge and share their experience in relation to film.

⁹ NETPAC is an acronym for The Network for Promotion of Asian Cinema, a leading platform to discover, document and promote Asian cinema. Founded in 1990, this network consists of film critics, film scholars, festival organizers and filmmakers across Asia and based on Colombo (Sri Lanka). Annually, the NETPAC prize is awarded more than 28 international film festivals including in JAFF.

Indeed, I keep maintaining my contact to the Malaysian independent filmmakers through e-mail and social media. Being not completely an outsider in (indie) film scene has facilitated me not only to have privilege access and contacts with some important informants, but also prior understanding of the territory of my research. However, as an Indonesian researcher posits me to cultivate such critical detachment and self-reflexive position in studying Indonesian cinema while as a “non-Malaysian” (outsider) provides me more opportunities to develop a position of an active learner of Malaysian culture and cinema.

During my fieldwork in Indonesia, I had many opportunities to attend some film festivals in various cities such as Indonesian Film Festival (FFI) in Jakarta, Indonesian Documentary Film Festival (FFD) in Yogyakarta, ASEAN Film Festival (in conjunction with Seminar on ASEAN as a Global Film Hub) in Denpasar (Bali), Balinale International Film Festival in Denpasar (Bali), and Jogja-NETPAC Asian Film Festival (JAFF) in Yogyakarta. Attending film festivals has allowed me to watch the current indie works and informally discuss with the filmmakers some current issues and problems of independent film production. In addition, I attended a seminar on ASEAN film industry, and gained some invaluable background information on the current conditions of film industry and film policy in Southeast Asian region including Indonesia and Malaysia. In contrast, there was almost no Malaysian film festival in Kuala Lumpur during my fieldwork except the new international short film festival, Kuala Lumpur International Short Film Festival (KLIS). Although this festival was quite new it was surprisingly fully supported by Malaysian government organizations such as FINAS, Malaysian Tourism Board, and Media Development Corporation (MDeC). Ironically, some Malaysian independent filmmakers in Malaysia, whom I met and interviewed with, did not

recognize this festival. In fact, I only found four Malaysian short films¹⁰ in this festival despite the festival director's claim that it received 1,000 entries from 75 countries. Interestingly, the festival held an Indonesian-Malaysian film workshop that explored some challenges and opportunities to foster co-productions between two countries.

The opportunity to observe directly how the film director at work came when on 19 February 2012 Mamat Khalid invited me to visit his shooting location of his new film tentatively entitled *Amir dan Lokman Pergi Ke Laut* (Amir and Lokman Go to the Sea) in Ipoh (176 kilometers south-west of Kuala Lumpur). This was a wonderful experience because I could meet the film crew to ask many technical issues during film shooting. I was able to watch more than five scenes of the film being shot in different locations in Ipoh and, most importantly, I could interview Mamat Khalid and had several informal conversations during shooting breaks and after the shooting wrap-up, about his personal life and his other works as well as his perception of current conditions of the Malaysian film industry. Moreover, I had great opportunities to watch some films (such as Garin Nugroho's *Mata Tertutup* and U-Wei bin Haji Saari's *Hanyut*), which were not yet released commercially at that time, as the film directors personally invited me to come to their studio or office. Of course, in their studio/office I was able not only to observe the real conditions and facilities of film studio/office, but also discussed the films directly (even scene by scene) with them. Also, I listened to some behind-the-scenes stories told by the film director/ producer such as the obstacles and challenges in film production from pre-production to post-production stage.

The vibrancy of indie film scene still can be experienced both in Indonesia and Malaysia during my fieldwork even after 13 years of *Reformasi* movement in 1998. The

¹⁰ Four Malaysian shorts have been selected in this festival: Yihwen Chen's *Like a Toy Doll* (CSR category); Kuan Min Chin's *My Telatory* (animation category); Bradley Liew's *The Hipster View* (student category); and Yoki Chin's *The Fisherman's Son* (short category).

various film events in both countries reflect the vitality of indie filmmaking and echo the interest generated. On 22 December 2011, for instance, I went to Bandung (162 kilometers south of Jakarta) to attend a gala premier of Samaria Simajuntak's *Demi Ucok* (For Ucok) held at the Bandung Zoo area. This independent film production was partly financed through a "crowd funding" system¹¹ in which the film producer uploaded the budget of film production to their website and invited those interested to put their money in the film in return for acknowledgement in both credit titles and poster. Most of independent filmmakers attended this event to express their support and solidarity and hence it was like an informal meeting among independent filmmakers as well as independent musicians from Jakarta and Bandung. Similarly, I also felt the vibrancy of the independent film community when I attended two Malaysian independent film previews in two different places and genres. The first film preview was held on 8 January 2012 at the Chinese Assembly Hall in Kampung Attap which screened three short films¹² on the Chinese Malaysian community followed by discussion with filmmakers in Mandarin and Cantonese. This event shows the centrality of alternative plural politics and rights in Malaysian independent film scene outside of the commercial

¹¹ "Crowd funding" is a form of fund rising activity that invites public (instead of individual funder) to participate in implementing any project in the field of creative industry. In Indonesia, the collective called "*Wujudkan*" (wujudkan.com) established in 2012 that focuses on the development of creative industry (music, film, fashion, etc.). In 2012 *Wujudkan* has granted the production of Riri Riza's film *Atambua 32°C*, and children music album as a tribute to Indonesian famous children composer, Ibu Sud. It should be noted that in the last five years, the crowd funding system become increasingly popular and there are about 460 crowd funding websites across the world. Currently, one of the popular crowd funding website is kickstarter.com established in 2009.

¹² All three short films are about the daily life of Chinese family in Malaysia. One of the shorts entitled *Rompin* tells the story about the personal experience of coming home (*balik kampung*) in the remote area afar from the capital Kuala Lumpur. The director's notes read: "I have been drifting away from my hometown since I came to the city to pursue my dreams. Jogging between reality and dreams over 20 years, I'm still filled with a kind of feeling toward my hometown. I always want to go home when I'm exhausted. Rompin is where I grew up and has been giving me a sense of energy. I still remember the first time I left home and went home. I made this short film with a fresh feeling to recall the experiences of going home and I wish all audiences who have the same experiences will be able to find back their feelings toward hometown and their dreams in life too." Meanwhile, another two short films tell the story of filial piety in Chinese belief and a frustrated housewife dealing with her children.

circuit yet it is closed to the local ethnic community. This film preview showed the great interests and concerns toward film that truly articulates both Chinese people and their culture as it was fully supported by the Chinese Malaysian community. The other film preview was held on 5 January 2012 at cinema in Sunway Pyramid Mall that screened a digital feature film entitled *Relationship Status* directed by Khairil Bahar who was recognized previously for a low budget film, *Ciplak* (Plagiarize, 2006) in the indie community. Although there was no post-screening discussion, I had a great opportunity to meet the film director and talked to the guests (mostly independent filmmakers and critics) before the film screening. Undoubtedly, two indie film previews have helped me to gain an insight to the current scene of independent film community in Kuala Lumpur.

Another instance of the vibrancy of the indie film scene in Indonesia and Malaysia were discussions on the broader issues related to cinema that took place in public venues. Through my informal contact, I knew that some bloggers from Jakarta and Bandung held a regular meeting (they commonly called it “offline meeting” or *kopi darat*) to discuss various cultural issues including film. On 25 November 2011, I attended one of their meetings held in Kemang (a famous nightlife area in Jakarta) to discuss the future of Indonesian cinema. The organizer invited two young film directors (Ifa Isfanyah and Andibachtiar Yusuf) and actor (Oka Antara) to share their practical experiences in film production and their views on the prospect of film industry in Indonesia. Film scriptwriter (Prima Rusdi) and film producer (Ade) also attended this meeting and they shared their experiences in dealing with film regulation and distribution. Undoubtedly, by attending this meeting I gained much invaluable information about the many challenges in the film industry (including practice of film censorship) from the insider perspective.

Similarly, during my fieldwork in Malaysia I attended a film screening and discussion in Bangsar district organized by Klub 51B and led by an activist-cum-

filmmaker Fahmi Reza. Although they screened an award-winning foreign documentary entitled *Bringing Down a Dictator* (directed by Steve York and narrated by Hollywood actor Martin Sheen), they discussed enthusiastically the current conditions of student movement in Malaysia in comparison with the student-led “*Otpor*” movement that defeated the Serbian leader, Slobodan Milosevic. This film discussion left me with an impression that film as an audio-visual medium has mediated young people to comprehend their milieu and even the outside world. I had a quite similar experience when I attended a mini symposium on “Wong Fu Productions” on 4 February 2012 organized by Filmmakers Anonymous at Taylor’s University Lakeside, Bandar Sunway. This symposium was designed to encourage young people to make a short film (using many convenient digital technologies) by inviting famous YouTube filmmakers Philip Wong and Ted Fu (founder of Wong Fu Productions). From this event I knew that digital technology had facilitated young people to make a short film without any fear of technical difficulties and to upload to the YouTube channel as an open platform for film distribution and exhibition.

It should be noted that all data collected from my fieldwork was combined with close analysis of filmic representations of selected critical commercial (mainstream) and independent film from Indonesia and Malaysia. The selection of these films is based on several considerations. **Firstly**, the selected films raised many pertinent social and political issues in contemporary Indonesia and Malaysia. Some pertinent issues such as religious and ethnic identities, urban breakdown, troubled youth and regionalism have clearly surfaced on contemporary Indonesian and Malaysian cinema. It should be clear that there are many other social issues, but I attempt to focus on social issues that resonate in public discourse through the mass media.

Secondly, the selected films have incited public discourses (some manifested in controversies) mediated through the mass media or became topics of discussions within

independent film community and social activists. The controversies over films usually started when the censor board cut particular shots and scenes (even in a particular case the title of film) or they asked the filmmakers and producers to “revise” or alter their films in order to comply with the censorship guideline. Since the film directors and producers sometimes exposed these censor board’s decisions through the media, there were various public responses either favorable or unfavorable against these decisions. However, some controversies emerged when particular social groups questioned and expressed their objections to some films that have already passed censorship. Focusing on the controversies surrounding films can be more objective (rather than focus on obscenity and offensiveness) because “the evidence of a controversy will be part of the public records, debates, protests and responses will be visible to others through various public address” (Phillips, 2008, p.xv).

Thirdly, the selected films garnered quite significant reception from the audiences; although these films might not necessarily hit the box-office. This reception is traced out by looking at the media reports (coverage) and informal conversations (discussions) among film enthusiasts and activists sometimes through Internet and social media. Although box-office records to a certain degree might be a useful indicator for a film's popularity, it is still quite problematic to understand the political relevance of popular films in generating pertinent social issues, since the box-office record has a commercial bias achieved through massive publicity and marketing campaigns. Therefore, some films are selected on the basis of their capacity to iterate social discourse and resonate relevant issues through cinematic representations.

Fourthly, the profile or social biography of filmmakers with their oeuvres is also the basis in film selection. I selected films directed both by professional (experienced) and novice filmmakers, not simply due to their popularity, but rather they were known for particular thematic social issues of racial, religious or sexual minority and

marginality. For instance, Indonesian film director Hanung Bramantyo has made more than 20 films, while in the last 10 years he consistently made films dealing with Islam and multiculturalism which have incited many controversies. In particular, some films are selected because the filmmakers (i.e. Nam Ron, Khoo Eng Yow, Tonny Trimarsanto, etc.) have involved in social/ political activism and they obviously used their work as a medium to articulate their political concerns and struggles. Finally, by combining data collected from my fieldwork and close textual analysis intersected with socio-political context of production, this thesis will provide more nuanced explanations and an insightful inter-reference of the politics of cinema in both countries. This will be elaborated in details in each chapter of this thesis which will be organized in the following manner.

Chapter Organization

Chapter two presents the broader context of social and technological infrastructure and film culture in contemporary Indonesia and Malaysia that leads to the emergence of alternative mode of filmmaking and distribution in the new democratic climate. In particular, this chapter explores the significance of digital technology in democratizing modes of film production and creating a new infrastructure (i.e. film communities, film events/ festival, etc.) and alternative networks (i.e., online distribution, social media, micro cinema, etc.) that enables more democratic circulation and vast consumption of the images in contemporary Indonesian and Malaysian society. I argue that the unprecedented impact of digital technology may contribute to the politics of “democratic becoming” as it enables more people to be involved in filmmaking by expressing various concerns and interests despite the persistence of the existing political establishment (*statusquo*) advocated by the conservative groups.

Chapter three contains a detailed analysis of filmic representations of the two

pertinent social issues (religious and ethnic pluralism and alternative sexual identity) both in critical commercial and independent films. Some feature films (*Sepet, Gubra, Tanda Tanya, Cin(t)a, CIN(t)A, Dalam Botol, Lovely Man*) and documentaries (*Gaduh, Renita Renita, Pecah Lobang*) are selected and analyzed on the basis of a combination of the contemporaneity of issue being raised, the ensuing media and social discourse, the particular degree of public reception and the profile of filmmakers. This chapter interweaves socio-cultural context of film production as well as social biography of filmmakers/producers with film narrative to understand not only the signature of filmmakers' styles, but also their political resonances in Indonesian and Malaysian society. In this chapter I argue that contemporary Indonesian and Malaysian cinema projects a fantasy of becoming egalitarian (democratic) society that transcends the existing socio-political conditions.

Chapter four extends the discussion of the previous chapter by focusing on the connection of troubled youth, urban crisis and peripheral areas in Indonesia and Malaysia as constructed in cinematic imageries. By examining marginalized space and place, this chapter underscores the spatial dimension of a struggle for visibility of “part of no part” within society which has been overlooked, although both Indonesia and Malaysia continuously deal with the territorial issue in the emerging aspiration for local autonomy as a critical response to the sweeping effect of centralization of governance. Some selected films are features (*Virgin, Songlap, Jermal, Mirror Never Lies, Wayang, Budak Kelantan, Bunohan*) and documentary (*Wayang Rindukan Bayang*) will be closely analyzed to illustrate social issues raised. This chapter argues that cinematic imagery of the problem of spatiality in contemporary Indonesian and Malaysian society point out not only the continuous problem of inequality/ disparity within the national space, but most importantly they make visible the unseen places with their people and culture.

Chapter five focuses on the debates and discourses as responses to

“controversial” films in order to understand the operation of permissible (acceptable) and impermissible (unacceptable) subjects in Indonesian and Malaysian cinema in the context of the post-authoritarian regime. Rather than simply listing most controversial cases related to cinema, in this chapter I examine what is really at stake in the controversies, particularly the struggle against the invisibility of the marginal or social/political taboos from the underside of dominant ideology. In particular, this chapter captures the antagonistic conflict between people in the film world (in alliance with social activists) and conservative groups, both a part of state organizations (i.e. *Lembaga Sensor Film*, *Lembaga Penapisan Filem*, *Majelis Ulama Indonesia*, *Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia*, *Majelis Fatwa Kebangsaan Malaysia*) and social groups (i.e. *Dewan Dakwah Islamiyah*, *Front Pembela Islam*). I argue that debates and controversies surrounding films not only reflect the contours of public discourse on cultural senses of the boundaries of “normalcy” and “morality,” but also the presence of policed visual regime in which the visibility and invisibility are still subject to regulation (control) in the *Reformasi* era.

Chapter six, finally concludes with the evaluation of the empirical and textual evidence presented in this thesis to argue that contemporary Indonesian and Malaysian cinema should not be understood simply as an expression of artistic freedom and political concern of filmmakers and truthful reflection of current socio-political conditions. Rather, they project a fantasy or social imaginary that evoke new social and political sensibilities to enlarge the horizon of possibilities within Indonesian and Malaysian plural society. Paradoxically, the social fantasy that emancipates desire towards a democratic (egalitarian) society has incited conservatism, which tends to preserve undemocratic (non-egalitarian) principles based on either religious or ethnic supremacy. Hence, contemporary politics in Indonesia and Malaysia is “becoming cinematic” in which socio-political realities are increasingly transformed into images and gestures while redistributing the sensible and making visible and audible what previously had no part or not counted in the whole society.

CHAPTER 2

“THE REVOLUTION IS BEING SHOT ON DIGITAL CAMERA”:

THE CHANGING FILM LANDSCAPE IN INDONESIA

AND MALAYSIA¹

[T]he word ‘amateur’ isn’t used very much anymore.

Nowadays everyone is a filmmaker.

Mike Figgis (2007, p.1)

I had been a filmmaker ever since the day

I had closed my eyes and pictured myself making movies.

Robert Rodriguez (1996, p.197)

I believe that that the digital revolution, of which we are witnessing

but the first phase for the last few years,

is not that much based on evolution as we might like to believe.

I have the impression it’s rather reconstructing cinema from scratch.

Wim Wenders (2001, p.36)

As has been discussed in the previous chapter, more than a political tsunami, *Reformasi* has immensely affected the social and cultural fabric of Indonesia and Malaysia including the film landscape. This chapter is about the social and cultural contexts that have contributed to the formation of a new film landscape in contemporary Indonesia and Malaysia. Therefore, this chapter aims to lay out the background to the proliferation of filmmaking and the emergence of new film culture in Indonesia and Malaysia since the *Reformasi* movement. In particular, this chapter pays close attention to

¹ The title of this chapter modifies slightly the title of Manohla Dargis’s article “The Revolution Is Being Shot on Digital Video” in *The New York Times* (17 December 2010). In her article, Manohla discusses the implication of digital technology in filmmaking (commercial films) on the film aesthetics.

the significance of digital technology² in democratizing as well as liberating modes of film production and constructing new infrastructure and networks that enable more free circulation or diffusion and vast consumption of images in Indonesia and Malaysia despite the restricted and oligopolistic commercial film circuit. Therefore, in this chapter I argue that the unprecedented impact of digital technology should be understood beyond the issues of accessibility, affordability, and flexibility, but rather they should be understood politically to challenge the dominant (existing) system of film production, distribution and exhibition and create a new film economy in the changing socio-political conditions in Indonesia and Malaysia.

This chapter is composed of four interrelated sections. The first section illustrates how digital technology has democratized and liberated filmmaking in the Indonesian and Malaysian contexts as well as in the larger context of Southeast Asia. The second section then describes the emergence of a “new generation” of Indonesian and Malaysian filmmakers who utilize and maximize all potentials of digital technology to channel their creative impulses and social/ political concerns, overcoming difficulties in conventional filmmaking. The third section describes the vibrant film culture and the mushrooming of film festivals and other film events across Indonesia and Malaysia as spaces for nurturing an independent spirit, cultivating film appreciation, creating an alternative film exhibition in the midst of declining film theaters in Indonesia and Malaysia. The last section further explains the emergence of the Internet as a new platform for film distribution and exhibition where independent filmmakers in Indonesia and Malaysia are able to overcome many hurdles in conventional film distribution and bypass the eye of film censorship with ease.

² The term “digital” is usually used in contrast with “analog.” “Digital” can be technically understood as information represented as computer data, whereas “analog” is signals created, measured and transmitted by variations in electronic frequencies. Thus, digital video is video captured and reproduced as computer data (Roman, 2001, p.223). Meanwhile, “digitization” can be defined as converting continuous data into numerical representation, which consists of two steps (sampling and quantification) (Manovich, 2001, p. 28).

Digital Liberation Under the Reign of “Digital Babylon”

The rise of an independent film movement as well as political activism in Indonesia and Malaysia is inseparable from the advancement of digital technology, especially digital camcorder, in which making film is becoming cheaper and less complicated. Unlike celluloid (35 mm film)³ as primary material in conventional film production, digital tape can be re-used and the camera needs only one person to operate it. Moreover, some new digital cameras allow storing footages (stock of shoots) in a chip or hard disk before editing either directly on location through on line editing or later in the post-production stage. Of course, the wider usage of the audio-visual medium in social/political activism has been affected by various factors such the new form of political activism, the failure of mainstream media in representing local and politically sensitive issues, and the accessibility of digital technology particularly among young people.

However, digital technology is not just a convenient gadget (technology) that is easily available. This is because digital technology allows a particular mode of narrative as well as aesthetics compared to conventional (celluloid) technology since it does not require meticulous treatment and high skills in order to operate it (personal interview with U-Wei Haji Saari, 18 January 2012). Moreover, before the advent of digital technology, it might take 10 to 15 years to be a professional director of photography if the material for film production is celluloid (Sasono, et. al., 2011, p.190). In other words, the digital camera is best used by novice film directors who no longer wait for many years for someone to take a chance in their projects. Not surprisingly, digital technology

³ “35mm” is a standard film gauge for commercial filmmaking since Thomas Edison and Eastman Kodak introduced it in 1899 (Bradford, Grant & Hillier, 2001, p.1). Meanwhile, introduced in 1923, “16mm” is an amateur gauge and used widely in documentary filmmaking after World War II since it proved particularly useful for combat footage (Bradford, Grant & Hillier, 2001, p. 1). The other larger standard film gauges such as “65mm” and “70mm” have been used for extra quality, but over time 35mm to strike a good balance between cost and ability to project a good quality image for projection.

is perceived as a form of democratization of technology and embodies a liberating spirit, particularly for those who do not have privilege to access highly expensive technology like a camera with 35 mm film and have special training to operate it.

Meanwhile, from the industrial perspective, digital technology is able to minimize the budget, speed up the workflow and inculcate an efficient working ethos. Put another way, digital technology also liberates commercial film producers from financial constraints and increasing production costs. For instance, some Hollywood films are shot simultaneously with multiple digital cameras in an effort to maximize production time and get entire scenes shot in a fraction of the time it takes to shoot a feature. Hence, digital technology brings many possibilities and affects many aspects of contemporary film production. It is not surprising that Shari Roman (2001) calls our new milieu a Digital Babylon, “a world saturated by hard data and new technologies, insatiable for the pleasure of fresh images of our universe and of our selves. A milieu wherein the cinema has become, as Mike Figgis has pointed put, “the most oversubscribed whore in the art world”” (2001, p.vi).

The pioneer of digital filmmaking in Indonesia is perhaps Garin Nugroho who shot his film *Puisi Tak Terkuburkan* (The Unconcealed Poem, 1999)⁴ using a Betacam digital video within six days in a small studio located in Depok (eastern part of Jakarta) then processing it at the film laboratory (Cineric Inc.) in New York and transferring (commonly called “blow up”) it into celluloid (35 mm film). According to Garin, “This technique is the first applied in Indonesia. This is the best way to save production costs despite for the sake of artistic reason, particularly the long shots (more than 10 minutes

⁴ *Puisi Tak Terkuburkan* probably the first Indonesian film that revisited the 1965 massacre since the 1998 Reformasi by creatively employing the Acehese oral tradition (*didong*) to give a testimony of the military brutality against whom has been suspected as member of the Indonesian Communist Party (Partai Komunis Indonesia/ PKI). For a thoughtful analysis of *Puisi Tak Terkuburkan*, see Rutherford (2001), but for a comprehensive analysis of films on the 1965 massacre produced after *Reformasi*, see Heryanto (2014).

long) which cannot be done by using a conventional camera"⁵(as cited in Sasono et.al., 2011, p. 182). The way Garin used a digital video for shooting then transferred it into a celluloid (35 mm) format has been increasingly followed by many filmmakers such as Indra Yudhistira in *Jakarta Project* (2000), Riri Riza in *Eliana-Eliana* (2002) and Rudi Soedjarwo in *Rumah Ketujuh* (2003) and the like.

Although in 1998, Riri Riza and his other fellow filmmakers still produced a film in celluloid (left over film stock from their work in a commercial advertising agency), he eventually realized the potential of digital technology. In an interview he remarks, "[I]n the year 2000, I think in a way, we started a digital revolution and digital can be an interesting alternative. And, of course, digital can also give you some specific and unique approach to filmmaking, that is something that actually inspired us to continue doing what we did with *Kuldesak*, and what turned into the I-Sinema manifesto, which basically allows us to do whatever we want, however we want, with the aim of producing unique and interesting films shaped by the decision of the filmmakers involved" (Ciecko, 2006a, p.94). Here Riri clearly represents a common tendency of his generation who see that digital technology offers a new approach to filmmaking from that of traditional filmmaking, that is expensive yet limiting in terms of its narrative style.

According to the Malaysian film critic and scholar, Hassan Abd Muthalib (2007), it was the accessibility of digital technology that facilitated the independent filmmaking group dubbed "The Little Cinema of Malaysia" or simply "Little Cinema" (*Sinema Kecil*).⁶ The digital technology has democratized filmmaking and offered great opportunities for those who do not have film-school degrees and access to the film

⁵ Cara ini boleh dikatakan pertama kali dilakukan di Indonesia. Sebuah cara untuk menghemat biaya, di samping memang ada kebutuhan estetikanya, yaitu shot-shot yang panjang (lebih dari 10 menit) yang tidak mungkin dilakukan dengan kamera film biasa.

⁶ The term "Little Cinema" was first coined by Malaysian film lecturer, director and critic Dr Anuar Noor Arai when he commented Amir Muhammad's first digital film *Lips to Lips* (Muthalib, 2012, p. 19).

industry. The convenience and accessible characteristics of digital technology inevitably attracted young people to make a film on a shoestring budget (or even “no budget” at all) without any fear of technical difficulties. According to a Malaysian independent filmmaker Khairil M. Bahar (2012) he spent less than RM 10,000 (approximately \$3,000) for *Ciplak* (Plagiarize, 2006) although he shot in London and Kuala Lumpur. Interestingly, most of the production cost was spent on the purchase of a digital camera and food, as there were almost no other substantial expenses during the film production. Khairil shot only on weekends in the locations where he and his cast, who were mostly his close friends and crew lived. He also borrowed lighting and audio equipment from his friends and edited the film on his own computer (Bahar, 2012).

Beyond accessibility, affordability and flexibility, the digital technology also opens up new possibilities in telling a story and finds out various alternative narrative styles that differ from the mainstream films with its analog technology. In an interview, the independent filmmaker Amir Muhammad says, “There is a kind of ontological relationship between the technology and the product; digital is not merely a tool. Which sort of people have to use this tool, what kind of stories have to be told with this tool, as opposed to more expensive tools, as opposed to people who have greater access to equipment—I think that already reflects what kind of person the maker is “ (Cazzaro, 2012, p.232). Here, the digital camera provides more freedom to filmmakers to create a narrative that is closely related to their own milieu, since it is user-friendly and convenient. For instance, digital films like *The Blair Witch Project* (dir. Daniel Myrick & Eduardo Sanchez, 1999), which were made with low budgets but had strong box-office and popular reception, has inspired young people in Malaysia to make similar digital films with innovative stories. *The Blair Witch Project* used a documentary approach (some called it “fakecumentary”) by using “found footages” of a group of young people who went missing after hiking in Burkittville, Maryland (US) in search of a local legend

named Blair Witch. Despite its phenomenal and critical success, the most compelling aspect of *The Blair Witch Project* film was innovative story telling that was completely different from formulaic Hollywood movies. Indeed, this innovative story telling facilitated by the digital camera enables the film to strive for a greater “realism” or “naturalism” where audiences are able to closely identify with the actors.

More importantly, *The Blair Witch Project* dispensed with the very idea of “professionalism” since it “took advantage of small cameras to create movies that prided themselves on the complete appearance of complete amateurism” (Rombes, 2009, p.105). Moreover, the “shaky camera” movement as can be seen in *The Blair Witch Project* is like most amateur films and precisely expresses the true attitude to the subject of film. By operating a handheld camera (a technique normally employed in documentary filmmaking), the filmmaker is able to move freely and closely to a subject and to fill the frame with an interesting-looking actor. As American independent filmmaker Robert Rodriguez (1996, p.204) writes, “The interesting human will always beat out the uninteresting set.” Similarly, recounting his famous film *The Idiots* (1998), Danish independent filmmaker Lars von Trier remarks that the “film was made in five weeks and I’ve shot about 90 per cent of it myself, with a small hand-held camcorder for amateurs. This gives a great difference in that if the camera is curious, it’s really you yourself who are curious” (cited in Rombes, 2009, p.105).

In the larger context of Third World countries, digital technology creates a spirit of liberation since the developed West no longer monopolizes the technology of filmmaking. Indeed, this liberation has deep resonance among Indonesian and Malaysian filmmakers, in particular, and Southeast Asian independent filmmakers, in general. As the exponent of Philippines independent filmmakers, Lav Diaz, states, “Digital is liberation theology. Now we can have our own media... We have been deprived for a long time, we have been neglected, we have been dismissed by the

Western Media. That was because of logistics. We did not have money, we did not have cameras, all those things. Now the questions have been answered. We are on equal position now” (Baumgärtel, 2012b, p.177). Likewise, another Filipino independent filmmaker and chair of the Independent Filmmakers Cooperative of the Philippines, Emman dela Cruz, remarks, “Digital has done for filmmaking what piracy has done for awareness: it gave so much freedom for The Third World film viewer and filmmaker.” (Baumgärtel, 2012a, p.145). This optimism of the liberating and empowering power of digital technology is understandable since filmmaking is no longer an expensive production which requires huge capital or big crew members but it may be an individual/ personal project either with a small crew or without any crew at all.

Digital technology has also created a structural parallelism between piracy and the independent films in Southeast Asia (Baumgärtel, 2012e, p.204). According to Baumagartel, both depend on the recent proliferation of relatively cheap digital tools: cameras, the Internet (for both communication and distribution), and fast disc burners that allow for mass production of DVDs and VCDs. In addition, there are some tools-of-the-trade such as cheap printers, scanners, and graphics-software that allow for the design and the production of covers or promotional materials (Baumgartel, 2012a, p.204). In particular, pirated art house films or what is often defined as non-Hollywood and non-local commercial films, which are easily obtainable in the market, have become important references for young independent filmmakers both in Indonesia and Malaysia. For instance, the Malaysian independent filmmaker, Amir Muhammad, talks about the influence of piracy on his generation of independent filmmakers:

I think we grew up watching Malaysian cinema to various degrees, but we are also of the generation that was very much exposed to cinema made in other countries.... (B)ecause we came of age with pirated VHS in the 80s and VCD in 90s, so I think our range of influences are wider. If it were not for these pirated things then we would have been stuck with what was brought here, which is extremely limiting (McKay, 2005, para. 81).

The practice of piracy marks the difference between Southeast Asian independent filmmakers from their counterparts in the West in which the economy of piracy is almost absent and the issue of intellectual property rights is an essential part of film production. However, the practice of piracy in the postcolonial and developing countries like Malaysia and Indonesia can be read as “ piracy as access” (Lobato, 2012, p.82) that takes place in the context where accessing media legally is not an option. Moreover, in the global context, for billions of people around the world, piracy is an access route to media (including film) that is not otherwise available.

It is noteworthy that in the Malaysian context, the development of digital technology is inseparable from the ambition of Malaysian government under the Mahathir Mohamad regime in building the Multimedia Super Corridor.⁷ This is a geographically designated area that stretches from Kuala Lumpur City Centre (KLCC) to Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA), including Putrajaya, Cyberjaya, and the wider Klang Valley (Hernandez, 2012, p.225). Most importantly, the Multimedia Super Corridor encompasses the Multimedia University, where a number of young Malaysian filmmakers have studied such as Liew Seng Tat, Tan Chui Mui and Deepak Kumaran Menon who later taught at this institution. It also resulted in the emergence of young digital video filmmakers in the late 1990s. In short, indie filmmaking has burgeoned partly due to the government’s push for information technology (IT) in its establishment of the Multimedia University and the Multimedia Development Corporation (MDeC). In contrast, there is no grand vision and policy on digital technology in Indonesia during that time. It seems that the Indonesian government simply overlooked the potential of digital technology. However, young filmmakers in Indonesia are technologically savvy since they have been living in the multimedia milieu (i.e. video games, video streaming

⁷ The Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) aimed to ‘leapfrog’ Malaysia from the industrial era to Information Era. The MSC was in line with Dr Mahathir Mohammad’s Vision 2020, the dream of fully developed, knowledge-driven Malaysia by 2020. For more a comprehensive study on the ideation and development of MSC mega project with reference to the seminal political events from 2007 to 2012, see Leong (2014).

in the Internet, etc.). Their ability to adapt with new digital technology and contemporary visual culture not only empowered them in filmmaking but also allowed them to collaborate with the members of their generation.

Meanwhile, viewed from the third world perspective, digital technology perhaps is an apt medium for the realization of the idea of an “imperfect cinema” as formulated by the Cuban filmmaker and theorist Julio Garcia Espinosa in 1960s at the height of the “Third Cinema” movement. He argues that there is an absolute necessity for a language of political transcendence, particularly in a world dominated by elites with their attendant ideals of aesthetic perfection since the discourse of perfection is ideological and elitist. More specifically, he states:

We maintain that imperfect cinema must above all show the process which generates the problems. It is thus the opposite of a cinema principally dedicated to celebrate results, the opposite of a self-sufficient and contemplative cinema, the opposite of a cinema which ‘beautifully illustrates’ ideals or concepts which we already possess. (The narcissistic posture has nothing to do with those who struggle) (Espinosa, 2004, p. 295).

Therefore, the mastery of the “technical” and “artistic” are marks of “perfect” cinema that is characterized by high production values and commercial gloss of Hollywood and its imitations. The digital technology clearly allows filmmaking at a low budget and provides more space for technical freedom and hence “imperfect” expressions that are precisely closer to social realities in Third World countries. The absence of big studios, big capital and gigantic technology in film production in Indonesia and Malaysia provide possibilities to create different images based on limited resources and difficult conditions in comparison to Hollywood spectacular of filmic images.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that there is some criticism or at least doubt over the rosy promises of digital technology. The general criticism concerns the quality of images produced by the digital technology, which is not superior to celluloid (35 mm). This criticism aside, it must be remembered that digital technology is always evolving

and the quality of images produced could well become even better than celluloid in years to come. In an interview, the leading German film director, Wim Wenders, says, "It's obvious that digital technology will eventually replace film. If you look around film is already quite an obsolete and anachronistic medium" (Roman, 2001, p. 187). In particular, shooting on a digital camera gives a lot of options or latitudes with better color rendition as the cameraman (filmmaker) can time the image on set with color-calibrated monitor that can be enhanced (corrected) in the post-production stage. In other words, the filmmaker can see the immediate result or gain an instant gratification from the images during the shooting process since there is no time delay of handling the film, sending it to a post-production house (studio) and watching dailies in a screening later.

Furthermore, for the sake of aesthetics, the digital camera is able to capture objects with minimal or low lights but provides particular artistic effects that are difficult to be executed by the conventional 35 mm camera. For instance, a long take - that is, a technique to capture the long and precious moments can be done perfectly by the digital camera rather than a conventional 35mm camera since the deep-storage capabilities of the digital technology allow for longer takes on the set/location. Indeed, this not only allows the development of scenes⁸ as series of shots on the natural set rather than on the heavy reliance on montage⁹ (artificial editing) but it also encourages a different kind of

⁸ Scene is a term much used in film studies to refer to a unit of narration (usually consists of several shots or a single shot) in a narrative film. It is also roughly defined as dramatic unit or series of actions (events), which takes place in a continuous time and space, so that a scene would change of time or place or both (Blandford, Grant, Hillier, 2001, p.204).

⁹ "Montage" (from French word *monter* meaning "to assemble") is a technique of film editing in which a series of short shots are edited into a sequence to condense space, time, and information. The term "montage" was introduced to cinema by the Soviet film director Sergei Eisenstein (1898-1948) as a synonym for creative editing. Eisenstein's montage (known as Soviet montage) is an arrangement of shots according to principle of collision, discontinuity, so as to suggest a concept beyond that contained in the shots individually (Blandford, Grant, Hillier, 2001, p.152-53). Generally, the term "montage" is contrasted to another French term "*mise en scène*" (literally "placing on stage"), a technique to designate the work done, largely by the director, in realizing the images from the words of the script (Blandford, Grant, Hillier, 2001, p.149). In more restrictive

acting (Rombes, 2009, p.39). Recounting the production of his innovative film *Timecode* (2000), British experimental filmmaker Mike Figgis (2007, p.89), explains:

In my recent films—particularly *Timecode* where everything was in one take and therefore everything had to be on camera because there was no chance to cutting away later on—a key element for me has been physical proximity of the camera to the actors. The involvement of cameraperson within the scene has been deliberate and important. It's been a conscious decision of mine—that film-makers be far more involved in the film than before.

In other words, the digital camera puts the cameraperson or sometimes filmmaker and the actors in the firing line rather than in a safe place as in the conventional approach of commercial film production. The close attachment with the actors imbued with an improvisational approach and a less complicated style enables the filmmaker to capture human emotions through the film characters.

Another common criticism against the digital technology is that its convenience tends to encourage sloppiness or violation of some basic rules in filmmaking. Due to the flexibility of the digital camera, it is quite tempting for a filmmaker to move the camera all over the place rather than position it in a certain way to help viewers easily understand spatial relations in a given scene (Baumgärtel, 2012, p.142). However, capturing mistakes, errors and randomness is not completely a taboo in digital filmmaking, rather it allows for the emergence of the real into the frame. The idea of “mistakism” as coined by the American independent filmmaker, Harmony Korine (2001), is likely to be practiced by many independent filmmakers because it encourages the spirit of exploration and experimentation. As can be seen clearly in *The Blair Witch Project*, a film that has inspired many Malaysian indie filmmakers, “the digital does not imply cold, anti-humanism technology, but rather intimacy, spontaneity and

usage, *mise en scène* refers to what is arranged on set before shooting (such as décor, costume, disposition of characters and aspect of performance, color and lighting but sometimes including camera angle and camera movement). *Mise en scène* usually seems looks like “natural” in the film rather than “montage” which is “artificial” as an assemble of different shots composed on the editing table.

imperfection" (Rombes, 2009, p.97). Thus, unlike expensive cameras for commercial film production, the digital camera does not need a tight (rigid) shooting plan but allows more room for improvisations in the shooting location. In fact, well-planned shootings in commercial film production do not necessarily guarantee the quality of film produced, as the aim is often simply to save production costs (personal interview with Amir Muhammad, 7 January 2012). Undoubtedly, digital technology shapes the distinct characteristics of young filmmakers in Indonesia and Malaysia and becomes an impetus of the emergence of new generation in the cinema landscape of both countries.

The "New Generation" in the Digital Era

This section explains the emergence of "new generation" or "new wave"¹⁰ of Indonesian and Malaysian cinema and their role in expanding the political possibilities both through their creative works and their critical engagement with the film industry in a newfound democratic climate in both countries. Although they have diverse social and educational backgrounds, the young Indonesian and Malaysian filmmakers in their 30s have collectively initiated an "audio-visual movement"¹¹ as characterized by the

¹⁰ The term "New Wave" (French for *la nouvelle vague*) is generally associated with the French film movement in the late 1950s and early 1960s initiated by "young Turk" filmmakers such as Jean Luc-Godard, Francois Truffaut, Eric Rohmer, Jacques Rivette and Claude Chabrol. Rather than a form of self-declaration by the filmmakers, the term "New Wave" originally forged by reviewers and journalists. Started as film critics in film journal *Les Cahiers du Cinema* and cinephiles who regularly visited the French Cinematheque, the young film directors brought new aesthetics in their filmmaking in term of narrative and style (see Greene (2007) for an excellent and concise account of the French New Wave). In a broader sense, "New Wave" probably can be attributed to "the virtual embodiment of an innovative, low-budget, cinema of youthful directors" (Green, 2007, p.2). Indeed, in this thesis the term "new wave", which is used interchangeably with the term "new generation", can be applied very loosely to a wide range of innovative filmmaking after the *Reformasi* movement.

¹¹ Unlike conventional political or social movements, the "audio-visual movement" perhaps can be located in its contestation through creative works against the dominant visual culture perpetuated and mediatized by commercial TV channel, advertisement, government propaganda and blatant commercial cinema. By injecting creative energy and new talents in filmmaking community, this movement aim is to open up more visibility of the marginalized (oppressed) subjects and breach some political taboos, which has long been silenced and suppressed under the undemocratic regime in Indonesia and Malaysia. This movement has functioned as one site in which a new critical politics was taking shape in Indonesian and Malaysian scene. Indeed, the young people are the vanguard of this movement since they are already immersed in visual

collective manifesto, spirit of camaraderie, great collegiality and collectivism to revive the malaise in the film industry since the early 1990s.

The independent (indie)¹² filmmaking in Indonesia and Malaysia started to thrive after the 1998 *Reformasi* which ushered in more democratic spaces which saw a liberalization of rules and restrictions to film production and exhibition. Prior to *Reformasi* in 1998, independent filmmakers in Indonesia were forced to work underground and adopt guerilla-like filmmaking styles¹³ since film regulations were tight and hampered the aspirations of many young filmmakers in Indonesia. At the same time, commercial or mainstream films had severely declined with a prevalence of films with bad scripts, poor performance and low production values. Similarly, many Malaysian mainstream films of the 1990s were “criticised for their ad-hoc and clumsy screenplays, poor production values and the manner in which they invariably portray women in marginalised and stereotypical roles”¹⁴ (McKay, 2011, p.76). Nevertheless, some resistance against the existing practices of film production was observed in the

culture as their immediate milieu, technologically savvy with critical social and political sensibilities. In other words, the proponents of this movement share same vision and purpose in filmmaking although they personally have different cinematic styles.

¹² I use the term “independent” and “indie” interchangeably throughout this thesis, as the word “indie” is a contraction of “independent.” However, in the context of American independent cinema, the term “indie” has tended to be associated with the variety of independence that gained prominence in recent decades, especially in its broader cultural presence in 1990s. In 1990s there were growth and partial incorporation by Hollywood of the independent sector in America (see Berra, 2008). Furthermore, in doing periodization of contemporary (post-1980) American independent cinema, Yannis Tzioumakis (2013) uses more narrowly the term “indie” to mark a particular phase in the recent history. Tzimoumakis uses other terms such as “independent” and “indiewood” to characterize some phases in the contemporary history of American independent cinema.

¹³ “Guerilla filmmaking” refers to a form of indie filmmaking characterized by shoestring budgets, small crews, and simple props using whatever available in the locations. In general, scenes are shot in real locations without obtaining permission from the owners of the location as the filmmakers do not have the budget to get permits, rent locations or build expensive sets.

¹⁴ Of course, there were few exceptions in Malaysian mainstream cinema in the 1990s that evoke unconventional themes with greater political and social sensibilities such as Suhaimi Baba’s *Selubung* (1992) and *Layar Lara* (1995), Adman Salleh’s *Amok* (1995), Mahadi J Murat’s *Sayang Salmah* (1995), and Erma Fatima’s *Perempuan Melayu Terakhir* (1999). These films attempt to look at subtly the Malay community in terms of political, cultural, psychological, gender and religious aspects. In other words, the central narrative of those films is Malay community and very superficially deals with other ethnic communities in Malaysian society.

early 1990s, particularly in Indonesia. The Indonesian film director Garin Nugroho recounts his experience in the 1990s, “When I made my film in 1992, filmmakers like Riri Riza were very young. At the time, (Indonesian President) Suharto said that if you want to make a film, you must be registered and work as an assistant director for several years. I said no. It is the first time I took all of the young filmmakers—if I started with people who are 45 it would be a problem—but I started with people who were 20 or 21 years old.” (Razukas, 2011, p.148).

The symbolic commencement of indie filmmaking in Indonesia was marked by the release of *Kuldesak* (Cul-de-sac/Dead-End, 1998), a film conceived since 1996 by four young film directors (Riri Riza, Mira Lesmana, Nan Triveni Achnas and Rizal Mantovani). Inspired by inexpensive production costs of independent films such as *El Mariachi* (dir. Robert Rodriguez, 1992) and Rodriguez’s book *Rebel Without a Crew* (1996)¹⁵, *Kudesak* is an omnibus (anthology) of four stories revolving around the problems of the middle-class youth in Jakarta such as drugs, homosexuality, and the feeling of absolute desolation. Not surprisingly, protagonists in the film represent young people in Jakarta with various backgrounds such as: a cinema ticket seller who adores a television celebrity and has a gay male friend, an art director at the advertising agency, and a son of rich family who obsesses with musician idol Kurt Cobain. The omnibus format was inspired by of *The New York Stories* directed by Woody Allen, Martin Scorsese, and Francis Ford Coppola (“Sinema Indonesia,” 2001). Breaking all film regulations of the New Order era, the film directors paid for the production cost themselves and were helped by actors and crew who joined the project for free.

¹⁵ Rodriguez’s book *Rebel Without a Crew* (1996) was based on his experience in making *El Mariachi* that was shot for around \$ 7,000 with money raised by his friend Carlos Gallardo and participating in medical research studies. *El Mariachi* won the Audience Award at the Sundance Film Festival in 1993 and later commercially distributed by Columbia Pictures in the United States. Both film and book have been widely inspired many young people to pick up a camera and make a low budget film; hence, the film and book have been considered as important landmarks of the independent film movement of the 1990s.

Following the critical and commercial success of *Kuldesak* on 8 October 1999, 12 young Indonesian filmmakers (i.e., Dimas Djayadiningrat, Enison Sinaro, Ipang Wahid, Jay Subiyakto, Mira Lesmana, Nan T. Achmas, Richard Buntario, Riri Riza, Rizal Mantovani, Sentot Sahid, Srikaton, Nayato Fio Nuala) signed the “I Sinema” Manifesto declaring their commitment to press on with film-making despite difficulties and uncertainties of the Indonesian film industry. The “I” in “I Sinema” is used to signify various meanings. It stands for the word “Indonesia”, “Independent” as well as “eye” and “I” (Sharpe, 2002). The manifesto has 5 bold visions: (1) film as freedom of expression; (2) to find a new art form and genre; (3) to maintain originality from censorship; (4) the ability to use any film material to achieve feature film standard; and (5) to maintain independence in production and distribution (“I Sinema Manifesto,” 2012, p.151). Members of this group explained the objectives of their manifesto in the following way, “We trust and support each other. The spirit of creativity, exploration, aesthetic attainment, plurality of themes and stories would provide a new color to Indonesian cinema. More importantly, we offer alternatives, insights, and new experiences to the audience”¹⁶(“I-Sinema,” 2002). Although I Sinema Manifesto was partly inspired by the famous Danish filmmakers’ manifesto “Dogme 95”, it was particularly aimed at reviving the Indonesian film industry rather than proclaiming a new aesthetics like the “Dogme 95” manifesto which was an oppositional movement against the hegemonic Hollywood cinematic style.¹⁷ In Indonesian film critic Eric

¹⁶ “Kami saling percaya dan memberi dukungan. Sinergi kreativitas, semangat eksplorasi, pencapaian estetis, keragaman tema dan cerita, semuanya untuk memberi warna baru pada perfilman. Lebih penting lagi memberi pilihan, wawasan, serta pengalaman berbeda pada penonton.”

¹⁷ “Dogme 95” (Danish word for “dogma”) was an avant-garde filmmaking movement initiated by two Danish filmmakers Lars Von Tier and Thomas Vitenberg and declared on 20 March 1995 in the Odeon Cinema Paris, the venue for a conference celebrating the centenary of cinema. With the famous slogan “Vow of Chasity”, the “Dogme 95” rules included the use of natural lights, real location for filming (not film studio), non-professional actors and the exclusion of both non-diegetic music illustration and elaborate special effects. They were later joined by fellow Danish filmmakers Kristian Levring and Soren Kragh-Jakobsen, forming “Dogme 95 Collective” or

Sasono's view, there is no aesthetic credo of "I Sinema", but rather the concern (or more precisely "complaints") about film organizations and structure in Indonesia (personal interview, 11 November 2011). The first "I Sinema" project released was Enison Sinaro's *Sebuah Pertanyaan Untuk Cinta* (Question About Love, 2000), short stories about love that span the seventies to the year 2000. This project was followed by several film productions by the I Sinema members such as Riri Riza's *Eliana Eliana* (2002), Nan Achnas's *Bendera* (The Flag, 2002), and Richard Buntario's *4 Sehat 5 Sempurna* (Four Healthy and A Perfect Five, 2002).

The enthusiasm and euphoria of making a film independently with the spirit of "making-your-own film" has been spreading across Indonesia which subsequently became a movement for young people who embrace filmmaking as part of their own world (Ratna, 2007). Film workshops for high-school students organized by PopCorner in Jakarta (1999-2000) played an instrumental role in bringing short filmmaking to a new generation (Ratna, 2007). Being a film director is hip among young people as they are familiar with digital technology which has encouraged outspokenness on socio-political issues. For instance, Nanang Istiabudi's widely circulated film *Revolusi Harapan* (Revolution of Hope, 1997) is an apt example since it uses a surrealistic style to tell the story of a gang of thugs whose mission was to kill and pull out the teeth of critical-minded students, artists, and activists. Clearly, this story refers to various forms of political repression usually accompanied by intimidation and torture of dissenters, particularly at the height of Soeharto's New Order regime. By the same token, Aryo Danusiri's *Kameng Gampoeng Nyang Keunong Geulawa* (The Village Goat Takes the Beating, 1999) tells the terrifying testament of the survivors of torture inflicted by Indonesian Special Forces (Kopasus) in Tiro, Northern Aceh, Sumatera. Another independent film which deals with the issue of transvestites in Yogyakarta is found in

"Dogme Brethen." For an excellent edited volume on "Dogme 95" Manifesto with its key historical and conceptual issues, see Hjort & McKenzie (2006).

Adi Nugroho's *Dunia Kami, Duniaku, Dunia Mereka* (Our World, My World, Their World, 1999). Independent films of the *Reformasi* period show a remarkable capacity to convey social and political issues deemed as "sensitive" and taboo during the New Order.

Since the *Reformasi* movement brought about a spirit of political decentralization, it encouraged more independent filmmaking in cities outside the capital Jakarta. Most local independent films were characterized by the usage of local dialects (versus the national language *Bahasa Indonesia*), local talents, local settings along with a focus on local issues. An example of an independent film that clearly reflects local culture is Bowo Leksono's *Peronika* (2004) that has been screened at virtually all independent film festivals and has become a good example of high-quality and low-budget independent film. Using entirely the Banyumas dialect, this film tells the technological gap (particularly the usage of mobile phone) between urban and rural people. Previously, an independent film entitled *Kepada Yang Terhormat Titik 2* (To the Esteemed, 2002) produced by Dimas Jayasrana and Bastian which employs the Banyumas dialect shows how ordinary people in Purwokerto perceived their city. It captures vividly and deliberately the gritty life of common people such as street vendors, street children and farmers. Likewise, Eddie Cahyono from Four Colours Films community in Yogyakarta made a short film entitled *Di Antara Masa Lalu dan Masa Sekarang* (Between the Past and the Present, 2001) that narrates the experience of older men when they fought against the Dutch colonial military during the Indonesian revolutionary period as typically depicted in the Yogyakarta milieu. Another independent filmmaker from Yogyakarta, M Aprisiyanto tackled the highly sensitive political issue of the 1965 massacre in his short film *Djejak Darah: Surat Teruntuk Adinda* (Blood Print: A Letter to Beloved, 2004). This short film narrates the fate of *ketoprak* (traditional troupe) artists who faced brutal persecution as they are accused of being members of the communist party. Both films have opened up alternative interpretations of the Indonesian political history,

particularly from the perspective of young people.

Meanwhile, the successful release of the first Malaysian digital independent film *Lips to Lips* (2000) directed by Amir Muhammad had inspired young people to make a low budget film with inexpensive digital cameras. As a film scholar Khoo Gaik Cheng found that the common sentiment towards *Lips to Lips* among Malaysian filmmakers was “If Amir can do it, so can we” or “so would we!” (Khoo, 2007, p.244). *The Village Voice* film critic Dennis Lim (2008) calls *Lips to Lips* as “a raunchy, talky, no-budget comedy often identified as a ground zero of the Malaysian indie scene...” (p.37). This film highlights a new mode of film production and opened up a new possibility to make a film outside the circuit of commercial film production (personal interview with Amir Muhammad, 7 January 2012). On another occasion Amir Muhammad talks about the production value of his film *Lips to Lips*: “The cost of my movie was a mere RM 80,000 (approximately US\$21,000)—slightly higher than the average TV drama. It is still on digital video (DV) and I am not transferring it to 35 mm film. People were generous enough to work for little pay because they wanted the thing to get made, and also because I can be charming when I want to be!” (Keshvani, 2010, p.279). Indeed, Amir’s film is still a modest budget compared to Erma Fatima’s *Embun* (Dew, 2002) that cost RM 3 million and Saw Teong Hin’s *Puteri Gunung Ledang* (The Princess of Mount Ledang, 2004) costing RM 18 million. Not surprisingly, Khoo (2011) defines independent film movement in Malaysia as “underground, low-budget (below RM 100,000), non-profit oriented, guerilla filmmaking, and made without consideration of being screened in the censor-ridden mainstream local cinema.”¹⁸

¹⁸ Indeed, there is precedence of indie filmmaking style with unconventional themes in Malaysia such as U-Wei Haji Saari’s *Kaki Bakar* (The Arsonist, 1997), Hishamuddin Rais’ *Dari Jemapoh ke Manchestee* (From Jemapoh to Manchester, 1998) and Teck Tan’s *Spinning Gasing* (Spinning Top, 2000). These films daringly tackle issue of Malay psyche and ethnic pluralism in Malaysian society and hence inevitably should deal with film censorship board. While *Kaki Bakar* portrays the marginalization of Malay people (particularly those who are with Javanese origin), it does not portray the ethnic plurality in Malaysia. Meanwhile, using English as the main language in the

The new generation of Indonesian and Malaysian filmmakers perhaps can be mapped out onto two distinct (but not exclusive) groups that reflect their connection to the collective film movement. The first group emerged almost in parallel with the political changes brought about by the *Reformasi* movement. In this group, most filmmakers are members of a closed-knit community and collaborate in several film productions with a strong spirit of camaraderie since they initiated a collective audio-visual movement. Indonesian filmmakers such as Riri Riza, Mira Lesmana, Nan Triveni Achnas, and Rudy Soedjarwo can be included in this group. Similarly, Malaysian filmmakers such as Amir Muhammad, James Lee, Tan Chui Mui, Liew Seng Tat, Deepak Kumaran Menon and late Yasmin Ahmad belong to this group. Meanwhile, the second group consists of filmmakers (some are younger than the first group) who are not directly connected to the collective film movement but their works are definitely enabled by the democratic climate and results from the changing film landscape in Indonesia and Malaysia. In Indonesia, some filmmakers such as Nia Dinata, Joko Anwar, Hanung Bramantyo, Rayya Makarim, Ravi Bharwani, Ifa Isfansyah, Edwin and recently Kamila Andini can be classified in this group, whereas Malaysian filmmakers such as Mamat Khalid, Osman Ali, Effendee Maslan, Fariza Aslina Isahak, Khir Rahman, Namron and Namewee belong to this group. Interestingly, in the Malaysian context, Chinese and Indian filmmakers, who are rarely found in the mainstream film industry, clearly mark the new generation of Malaysian filmmakers. Indeed, filmmakers of both groups are not completely isolated or alienated from each other, but rather supportive to each other in several film projects.

In Malaysian context, the emergence of a new generation of filmmakers is characterized by the configuration of multiracial filmmakers in the Malaysian film scene.

dialogue (conversation), *Spinning Gasing* attempts to depict different ethnicities in Malaysia and even it has a gay character. However, Amir Muhammad acknowledges that U-Wei had encouraged him to make a film when he met and interviewed him for his article (personal interview, 7 January 2012).

Therefore, some promising and talented Chinese as well as Indian filmmakers emerged to bring bold themes in the mainstream (Malay) cinema. Although their themes of everydayness of Chinese and Indian community are seemingly “personal” or “politically apathetic,” they truly question in a subtle way the position of Chinese and Indians as the second and third class citizens in contemporary Malaysia. In many ways the characters in their films are at the margins of society who are disenfranchised or alienated and quite powerless to chart the direction of their own lives. Of course, such themes are completely in contrast to the previous tendency of mainstream cinema that focused on the Malay middle-class family as a showcase of the success of government economic policy (New Economic Policy).¹⁹

Likewise, without any political baggage of the past and going against the grain of dominant filmmaking practices, the new generation of Indonesian filmmakers explores bold provocative themes (such as alternative sexuality, inter-religious relationships, Chinese ethnic minority, the 1965 massacre, etc.) and the cinematic style is almost without any precedence in the cinematic traditions of their predecessors. The vast array of works of the new generation of Indonesian filmmakers clearly epitomizes the vision of filmmakers themselves concerning the ideals of democratic society. Given the independent filmmaking background of some filmmakers, they attempt to reinvent the new production culture that leads to a more equal position among three important actors (producer, scriptwriter and film director) in film production (usually known as “triangle system”) with spirit of great collegiality, camaraderie and collectivism. In addition, the new generation tends to defy the strict (bureaucratic) film regulations. Since most of them are not part of the existing of film production system, they need to find their own way to make a film (personal interview with Riri Riza, 18 November

¹⁹ The aesthetic realism in most of independent films is intimately related to the limited funding in which they use non-professional actors, natural film set or minimal (artificial) lighting and real location. As a result, the audiences are able to see the gritty realism and vivid depictions of the conditions of marginalized Chinese and Indian communities.

2011). They are fed up with the complicated formal procedures to make a film, which was a great entry barrier for young filmmakers. The symbolic success of the release of *Kuldesak* as an indie film perhaps marked the new mode of film production that broke many film regulations and signaled the bankruptcy of old style film production of the New Order era.

It should be noted that the spirit of collectivism is still alive among the younger filmmakers in Indonesia through an omnibus project, the release of *Kuldesak* in 1998.²⁰ Indeed, the motive behind this omnibus production is varied. The concern with social or political issues may inspire a filmmaker pick up the camera, make a film and join other filmmakers who share same concerns. For instance, the omnibus title *9808* (2008) consists of 10 short films by 10 young film directors (Anggun Priambodo, Ariani Darmawan, Edwin, Hafiz, Ifa Isfansyah, Lucky Kuswandi, Otty Widasari, Ucu Agustin, Wisnu Suryapratama, Steve Pillar Setiabudi) to commemorate the 10th anniversary of Indonesian political reform (*Reformasi*). The stories in this film revolve around the memories of May 1998 among student activists, ordinary people and the victims of social riots following the *Reformasi* as well as its social/political impact on the ethnic Chinese in Indonesia. This project was self-funded by all participants (filmmakers, artists, musicians and academics) under the “Umbrella Project” (*Proyek Payung*). Besides common concerns on certain social/ political issues, plus a collective sense that they belong to the same generation (though with different creative work backgrounds), has motivated them to do an omnibus project like *9808* (interview with Ifa Isfansyah, 19 June 2013). Recently, some filmmakers are also taking issue with sexual minorities such as gay and lesbian in the omnibus *Jakarta Sanubari* (*The Heart of Jakarta*, 2012) made by 10 film directors (Billy Christian, Aline Jusria, Tika Pramesti, Lola Amaria, Kirana Larasati,

²⁰ The tsunami disaster in Aceh in the north tip of Sumatera island had inspired 4 film directors (Garin Nugroho, Tonny Trimarsanto, Viva Westi, and Lianto Luseno) to make an omnibus entitled *Serambi* (*Verandah*, 2006) to commemorate that disaster. This film was officially selected in Un Certain Regard Section at Cannes Film Festival.

Alfrits John Robert, Adriyanto Dewo, Dinda Kanyadewi, Fira Sofiana and Sim F).

Likewise, 15 Malaysian filmmakers work collectively in producing *15 Malaysia* (2009), an omnibus dealing with various socio-political issues in contemporary Malaysia. Produced by independent song writer/singer, Pete Teo, the omnibus made by a mix of leading independent filmmakers (Amir Muhammad, Yasmin Ahmad, James Lee, Ho Yuhang, Woo Ming Jin, Liew Seng Tat, Tan Chui Mui) and other indie filmmakers and artists (Khairil M. Bahar, Linus Chung, Johan John, Desmon Ng, Namron, Kamal Sabran, Benji Lim, Jordan Suleiman and Mussadique Suleiman). Not surprisingly, there are varied forms from documentary to stylistic montaged black-and-white photos as well as different themes from a hilarious manual of “halal” slaughter to rampant corruption in today’s Malaysia. In other words, the omnibus format allows every filmmaker to express his/her unique cinematic style as well as his/her concern on various social and political issues. Another initiative to raise public awareness of the danger of Lynas rare earth processing plant in Gebeng near Kuantan (Pahang)²¹ is titled *Survival Guide Untuk Kampong Radioaktif* (Survival Guide for Radioactive Kampong, 2011). This film project consists of four short films largely parodying the impact of radiation in the near future of Malaysia. Directed by Liew Seng Tat, Tan Chui Mui, Woo Ming Jin and Yeo Jun Han, the four films were distributed through YouTube channel, as the main target audience were netizens. There are four stories in Kampong Radioaktif: *Welcome to Kampong Radioaktif* (dir. Liew Seng Tat); *Orang Minyak XX* (Oily Man, dir. Yeo Jun Han); *Masakan Cinta*

²¹ The potential hazards of radioactive waste that will be left behind by the Lynas rare earth refinery located approximately 25 kilometers from Kuantan (Pahang) have raised public concern. In order to express their concern on the public health impacts of Lynas project, local communities have formed “anti-Lynas” group, held talks and rally and raised funds to travel to Australia to lobby foreign lawmakers. However, the Pahang government, Lynas Corp and Australian Minister have claimed that the refinery is safe and meets the international standard. Malaysia had a bad experience of environmental disaster in Bukit Merah (Perak) where Mitsubishi Chemical is still spending millions cleaning up the site two decades after the refinery was closed in 1992. Linas Corps finally secured a temporary operating license and began operations in November 2012, but the company needs to monitor and publish periodically the radioactivity level.

(*Love Dish*, dir. Woo Ming Jin) and *Cinta Lai Kwan* (*Lai Kwan's Love*, dir. Tan Chui Mui). All stories in four films are set in fictional locations where radioactive activities have occurred and all the capitalists, profiteers, corrupted policymakers and government officers have escaped to safe countries leaving the citizens behind to suffer the heavy radioactive contamination. Although the set seems fictional, it clearly refers to Kuantan where the Lynas project will be implemented.

Unlike their predecessors, most new generation Indonesian and Malaysian filmmakers are well educated and some even have overseas education in film schools that affect the way they view their society and articulate social and political concerns. According to a study conducted by the Jakarta-based non-profit organization *Rumah Film*, there are more filmmakers (actively working from 1998 to 2009) with formal film training (education) from overseas (26 filmmakers) than non-film training background (12 filmmakers) (Sasono et. al, 2011, pp. 120-133). However, most of them have a limited knowledge (references) about the history of Indonesian cinema (except those who studied at the Jakarta Arts Institute) since their knowledge of cinema derived from the pirated VCDs/DVDs and multichannel TV programs. Thus, they are rather disconnected from the traditions of Indonesian cinema but in tune with the tradition of world cinema. Similarly, some exponents of new generation Malaysian filmmakers have overseas education such as Amir Muhammad (University of East Anglia, United Kingdom and New York University, United States), Woo Ming Jing (San Diego State University, United States), Ho Yuhang (Iowa State University, United States), late Yasmin Ahmad (New Castle University, United Kingdom), while the others graduated from local educational institutions such as the Multimedia University (Tan Chui Mui, Deepak Kumaran Menon, Liew Seng Tat) and Aswara (Namron, Khir Rahman).

Clearly, both new generations in Indonesian and Malaysian share same social and political concerns, being technologically savvy, practice new mode of film

production, and have comparatively equal educational backgrounds. However, the emergence of the new generation Malaysian filmmaker was partly pushed by the ambition of Malaysian government to create a multimedia super corridor, whereas the new generation of Indonesian filmmakers emerged from their interaction with digital technology and the multimedia milieu. Interestingly, the Malaysian indie film producer looks at Indonesia as a good model in which indie filmmakers cross over to commercial film but they still retain their personal and artistic style. As Lina Tan, an executive producer of Red Films, states “Before producing *Ada Apa Dengan Cinta?*, Mira Lesmana has been an active independent film producer in Indonesia. Look at her film now that is commercial yet artistic. This kind of film should be produced a lot here in Malaysia”²² (Awang, 2003, p.59). Learning from the success of *Ada Apa Dengan Cinta?*, the Red Films producer Lina Tan invited the co-scripter of *Ada Apa Dengan Cinta?* Prima Rusdi as a script consultant for the production of *Gol & Gincu* in order to help to refine the narrative direction of the film (McKay, 2011, pp.87-88).

Unlike Euro-American indie filmmakers, both Indonesian and Malaysian new generation of indie filmmakers keep struggling to find funding from many sources and some indie filmmakers find it from foreign funding institutions (i.e. Hubert Bals Fund, Global Film Fund, Asian Network Documentary Fund) as it can help filmmakers gain independence from complicated and restrictive financial arrangement offered by state agencies in their home countries. In America, some indie filmmakers depend on corporate sponsorship in the form of Hollywood studios; hence, American indie films could be understood as “marginal Hollywood cinema” (Berra, 2008) but with great significant characters and innovative form (Newman, 2011) that serve particular niche audiences in the film market. Meanwhile, in Europe, government art commissions or

²² “Sebelum menerbitkan filem *Ada Apa Dengan Cinta?*, Mira Lesmana adalah penerbit filem independen yang aktif di Indonesia. Lihat hasil filem itu, ia komersial tapi sekaligus berseni. Bentuk filem beginilah yang kita mahu lebih banyak dihasilkan di Malaysia.”

public television stations provide financial assistance to indie (sometimes novice) filmmakers as an attempt to sustain the art film production and to preserve cultural heritage that is simply neglected by commercial (mainstream) cinema. While some American indie films are quite disturbing (shocking) for general audiences in terms of theme and narrative, they are part of a marketing tactic to grab a particular audience. In contrast, both Indonesian and Malaysian indie deliberately tackle pertinent social issues in their films due to their political concern or critical response to socio-political situations rather than commercial motives. It is important to note that Euro-American indie filmmaking is deeply rooted in the experimental and avant-garde filmmaking tradition in the 1960s and 1970s, while most Indonesian and Malaysian filmmakers learn from Euro-American avant-garde films often from pirated copies that are easily obtained in the market or when they study film in America or Europe. Indeed, indie film publications (*Filmmakers* magazine), film schools, indie film organization (Independent Feature Project) and film festivals (Sundance Film Festival and Independent Spirit Awards) are important social and cultural infrastructure for the development of indie filmmakers (Levy, 1999; Ortner, 2013). With exception of independent film festivals, there are very limited local film schools (as training ground for indie filmmakers) and lack of indie film publications (as source of information and publicity of local indie films/filmmakers) both in Indonesia and Malaysia. In this regard, the emergence of new generation Indonesian and Malaysian filmmakers is inseparable from the mushrooming of film festivals, which provide an alternative platform to circulate and disseminate their works and create a vibrant film culture.

Creating a Vibrant Film Culture through Film Festivals and Film Communities

Despite the democratization of filmmaking and the emergence of new digital filmmakers, the advent of digital technology has triggered the mushrooming of film

festivals across Indonesia and Malaysia. Since film can be easily transferred and stored in a digital format (VCD/DVD), it only requires a portable VCD/DVD player and projector for film screenings. Hence, organizing a film festival is less complicated (with a small team/committee), less expensive and more flexible in terms of venue and equipment. In other words, the new digital technology of exhibition plays a part in enhancing cinema's public access by making digital films more widely available than the law or film censorship would allow. Digital technology has changed radically the landscape of film distribution and exhibition in which key limitations of the physical world no longer hold in digital realms. Undoubtedly, film festivals can be held indoors and outdoors and even travel easily from one place to another. In addition, the conventional role of film festival as critical node will be diminishing due to the new festival intermediaries facilitated by digital technology which enable filmmakers to submit their films to festivals electronically (Fischer, 2012b). While some new on-line festivals focusing on short films are streaming through Internet (i.e. the American Media That Matters Film Festival and the Japanese CON-CAN Movie Festival) and inviting audiences to participate in voting system on-line, they still depend on real-time events as they arrange ceremonies in actual locations to create a festive atmosphere and add spectacular dimension of the festival (De Valck, 2012, p.125). Indeed, in the future, digital technology will disturb the conventional exhibition practice in most film festivals. Hence, the existence of film festivals absolutely depends on their capability to adapt to the new circumstances shaped by digital technology including the Internet.

As is well known, the proliferation of film festival across the world is symbolically linked to three factors: the hunger of new independent filmmakers for an appreciative audience, the yearning for non-Hollywood fare and the desire of small film distributors to take an opportunity to earn money and promote their products to the fullest extent (Turan, 2005, p.7). Moreover, film festivals in many countries play

numerous roles as they “accommodate culture and commerce, experimentation and entertainment, geopolitical interests and global funding “ (De Valck, 2007, p.16). In other words, most film festivals operate in four broad areas: geopolitics, business and culture. However, unlike big global film festivals (Cannes, Berlin, Venice, Sundance, Rotterdam, Toronto, Pusan) as blatant trade fairs with production and distribution deals, both Indonesian and Malaysian film festivals are providing a platform for young or novice filmmakers to be widely recognized and appreciated, providing financial assistance for film production (through proposal pitching or prize), building up filmmakers’ profile, nurturing film appreciation, cultivating national/ local identity since they do not establish a film market. In particular, various film festivals in Indonesia and Malaysia have crucially sustained a vibrant film culture due to diminishing movie theaters in both countries; hence, they have provided public access to current non-mainstream local films as well as created a platform for novice and young filmmakers. Like most film festivals in the world, Indonesian and Malaysian film festivals offer a sense of community and togetherness during film screenings and other fringe events around the festival. In particular, grass root film festivals organized by film communities have intimate and embedded audiences, as their festival scale is local.

It should be noted that the proliferation of film festivals in Indonesia and Malaysia after *Reformasi* is also partly due to the perpetual “crisis” of government-sponsored film festivals in establishing their prestigious reputation and recognition among broader filmmakers in respective countries.²³ These film festivals have been designed by the government in Indonesia and Malaysia to promote national culture and

²³ In 1992, the Indonesian government-sponsored film festival (FFI) collapsed due to the decline of commercial film production and lack of quality films. In that year, the total number of film produced was 41 or less than the half of total production of previous year (112 films). Most of films in that year marked by cheap production value, low quality of star performance and cinematography and cliché themes (sexploitation and campy horrors). The year 2000 even marked the lowest number of commercial film production as only 3 films produced due to the unstable political conditions and bad climate in film business (Irawanto, 2004).

identity since cinematic awards are also about reinforcing the ideals of national cinema. In the Indonesian context, the annual government-sponsored Indonesian Film Festival or FFI, which was established in 1955, has given out awards to films that were not necessarily popular with audiences. As Krishna Sen has noted, "The festival award system operates not by punishment (like censorship), or through exclusion (like the market), but through the privileging of certain films and their makers, and by extension of certain perspectives on art and society" (1994, pp.54-55). Meanwhile, Malaysian Film Festival (FFM), which was originally initiated by The Entertainment Journalist Association of Malaysia (EJA) in 1980, had been intended as a showcase for the finest Malaysian films. The awards were given out to the films that truly reflected the Malaysian national character or identity although they tended to promote Malay dominant culture and nationalistic predilections in their filmic representations.

Indeed, there were many sharp criticisms against government-sponsored film festivals both in Indonesia and Malaysia. For instance, FFI has been criticized for its tendency to be merely ceremonial and an extravaganza party with glamorous appearance of film stars rather than a true appreciation of achievements by the film industry. Moreover, decisions by the jury are often controversial as jury members are often closely associated with the government's political interests.²⁴ Likewise, since the National Development Film Corporation (FINAS) organized the FFM, it has been an object of criticism from people in the film industry as FINAS is deemed as a mere

²⁴ The climax of controversies in the Indonesian Film Festival event was the returning of Citra Award by filmmakers, crews, critics to symbolize their rejection and protest against the Best Film *Eskul* (Extra-Curricular, dir. Nayato Fio Nuala, 2006), that illegally taken out the music score from Hollywood and Korean films, leading to the formation of Masyarakat Film Indonesia (Indonesian Film Society or MFI). In particular, the members of MFI questioned the transparency of FFI and credibility of the jury. After MFI protest and the wide publication of the controversy in the mass media, the Indonesian Film Council (BP2N), an authoritative organization in Indonesian cinema, revoked the award of the Best Film. Another controversy sparked again in 2010 when the official jury questioned the work of selecting committee members who did not pass Hanung Bramantyo's biopic *Sang Pencerah* (The Enlightener, 2010) for competition due to the lack of historical accuracy. As a result, the organizer appointed new jury member that selected Beni Setiawan's *3 Hati Dua Dunia Satu Cinta* (3 Hearts Two Worlds and One Love, 2010) as the Best Film, whereas the former jury announced *Sang Pencerah* as the Best Film.

bureaucratic organization with administrators who have no knowledge about the film industry (Khoo, 2006, p.92). Like criticism against the FFI, the jury composition at the FFM is equally controversial since there is a conflict of interest since the jury members are representatives of the film industry whose films are in competition.²⁵ The prestige of FFM has been gradually declining as many well-recognized and highly artistic films have failed to rake any awards, not to mention the repetition of similar controversies almost every year.²⁶ In addition, FFM only accepts films that are in *Bahasa Malaysia* and not the other languages for the main awards competition.²⁷ Both government-sponsored film festivals in Indonesia and Malaysia have the same problem of integrity in terms of jury composition, selection and judgment process in choosing the best cinematic works that truly reflect the creative achievement in the film scene of both countries.

After *Reformasi* in 1998 most film festivals in Indonesia and Malaysia aim to broaden film appreciation to diverse film genres and encourage young filmmakers to make a good quality film rather than to build up a film market or commercial distribution network as can be found in standard “business festival” (Peranson, 2009). In other words, film festivals became a key element of alternative (non-mainstream) in film circulation and exhibition outside the commercial film circuit. In general, film festivals in Indonesia can be classified based on their type, level and objective (as illustrated in Table 2.1.). In regard with the type, film festivals can be organized and funded independently

²⁵ In the 24th FFM (2011), there was controversy regarding the judgment process in which one of the jury members (Jurey Latiff Rosi) whose film *Libas* (Whip) on the competition section finally got an award for the Best Original Story (*Cerita Asal Terbaik*) (Ahmad, 2011, p.17).

²⁶ There are some controversies related to FFM since the mid 1980s such as: (1) the dispute between Gabungan Karyawan Filem Malaysia (Film Professionals Association of Malaysia or Gafim) and Persatuan Penerbit Film Malaysia (Malaysian Film Producers Association) over the legitimate organizer of FFM; (2) the irregularity of the festival as FFM was absent in 8 years (1985, 1988, 1991, 1993, 1996, 1998, 2000 and 2002) partly due to the lack of quality films and the dispute over the legitimate festival organizer (Awang, 2003a, p.54).

²⁷ The category of Non-Malay Features (*Film Cereka Bukan Bahasa Melayu*) such as Tamil-language and Chinese-language films only included in the catalog of Festival Filem Malaysia (FFM) 24 in 2011. However, all those films are not the main competition for the Best Film but rather in the peripheral position as Non-Malay-Language Films.

or part of corporate-sponsored event. While corporate-sponsored film festivals might be able to maintain their sustainability, independent (self-financed) film festivals usually struggle to keep their regularity due to financial constraints or limited funding. Meanwhile, in terms of level (scale), film festivals can be international, regional, national and local as reflected in film selection or programming. Although some international or regional film festivals in Indonesia and Malaysia (i.e. Jakarta International Film Festival, Jogja-NETPAC Asian Film Festival, Kuala Lumpur International Film Festival) screen films from different countries, they still highlight domestic (local) films since they actually cater to local audiences. Moreover, in terms of film genre, most film festivals in Indonesia and Malaysia screen feature (fiction) length and shorts, while only few film festivals (i.e. Freedom Film Festival, Yogyakarta Documentary Film Festival) especially focus on documentary. At the same time, some international or national film festivals can be more issue-oriented (i.e. Q! Film Festival, V Film festival, Freedom Film Festival, Emergency Film festival, Tudung Film Festival) that deal with various issues such as sexuality, gender, political (human rights) and religious issues.

Table 2.1. Film Festivals in Indonesia and Malaysia Since *Reformasi*²⁸

Name of Festival	Established	Type & Level	Organizer	Objective
INDONESIA				
Festival Film-Video Independent Indonesia (FFVII)	1999	Nationwide independent film festival	Konfiden	To promote Indonesian (local) independent films/ videos (particularly shorts)
Jakarta International Film Festival (JIFFEST)	1999	International Film Festival	Yayasan Mandiri Film Indonesia	To provide public access to "alternative" (non-Hollywood) films
Festival Film Pelajar dan Mahasiswa	2000	Local independent film festival	Universitas Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta cine-	To be a meeting point for local filmmakers around Java and to form

²⁸ Indeed, this table is not intended to be exhaustive in illustrating the numerous film festivals in Indonesia and Malaysia. This is because some small film festivals (i.e. grass root and local film festivals) simply are not reported by the mainstream mass media or they do not set up websites to inform their programs and activities.

			club	wider networks among filmmakers.
Festival Film Dokumenter (FFD)	2001	Nationwide independent documentary film festival	Komunitas Dokumenter	To be a platform for Indonesian independent documentary film and a meeting point for documentary filmmakers
Pesta Sinema Indonesia (Pesta Sinema Indoensia)	2002	Local film festival	Students of Universitas Jenderal Sudirman (Purwokerto-Central Java)	To provide a variety references (outside of mainstream) to the local audiences
Q Film Festival	2002	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender-themed film festival	Q-Munity	To raise film appreciation and to be part of advocacy (education) on sexual minority rights
Festival Film Independen Indonesia	2003	Corporate-Sponsored Short Film Festival	Surya Citra Television (private TV station)	To promote both amateur and professional short films
Jakarta International Video Festival (OK. Video)	2003	Biennial International Video Festival	Ruang Rupa (artist's initiative based on Jakarta)	To support the development of video art in Indonesia
Hellomotion Festival (HelloFest)	2003	Nationwide short and animation film festival	HelloMotion Academy	To promote creativity in the field of animation, short film and other pop culture arts in Indonesia
Festival Film Pelajar	2005	Local and grass root film festival	Komunitas Creatifilm (Cianjur-West Java)	To promote local independent short filmmakers, particularly high school students.
Festival Film Pendek Konfiden	2006	Nationwide Independent film festival	Yayasan Konfiden	To promote Indonesian independent films
Festival Film Purbalingga	2006	Grass-root and local film festival	Cinema Community Lover	To promote short films (feature and documentary) produced by high school students in Banyumas Residence
Jogja-NETPAC Asian Film Festival (JAFF)	2006	Asian film festival	Yayasan Jogja-NETPAC Asian Film Festival	To promote and foster public appreciation to the richness of Asian cinema
V Film Festival (Festival)	2009	Women-themed film festival	Collaboration of Komunitas Salihara, Kalyana Shira Foundation, Kartini Asia Network and Jurnal Perempuan	To provide more space for women films to reach their audiences and to initiate a collaboration between women activists and art workers.
Festival Film Solo	2011	Local and independent	Collective film activists based on	To promote short feature films and to be a

		film festival	Solo (Central Java)	meeting point between people in film world and public.
MALAYSIA				
Freedom Film Festival	2003	Human rights-themed film festival	PUSAT KOMAS (Center for Community Communication)	To inculcate the spirit of film activism among the current generation of cinemagoers and filmmakers
Festival Filem and Video Pelajar Malaysia (FFVPM)	2003	Nationwide student films festival	Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM) supported by the National Development Film Corporation (FINAS)	To provide a platform of the work of Malaysian tertiary students and to discover new talents in the field of creative industry among local university students.
Cyberjaya Digital Video Competition	2004	Grass-root short film (video) festival	Cyberjaya Community	To provide young talents with a platform to showcase their creativity in digital video production
Tudung Film Festival	2005	Political-themed film festival	Kelab Seni Filem Malaysia, Goethe Institut Kuala Lumpur, Sister in Islam (SIS)	To promote Malaysian independent films with a current political issue
BMW Shorties	2006	Corporate-sponsored short film festival	BMW Group Malaysia	To be a platform for Malaysian short filmmakers to explore their talents.
Maskara Shorties	2007	Independent short film festival	Sindiket Sol-Jah in cooperation with PENA (National Writers Association)	To encourage limitless creativity among independent filmmakers.
Kuala Lumpur Eco Film Festival (KLEFF)	2007	Environmental-themed film festival	EcoKnights (non-profit environmental organization focusing on education and outreach)	To showcase the award winning environmentalist films and to encourage Malaysian filmmakers to document stories with environmental messages
The Emergency Festival	2008	Political-themed (film) festival	Collective of artists and producers of Malaysia	To offer a creative storytelling of the Malayan Emergency by local artists (including filmmaker).
Kuala Lumpur International Film Festival (KLIFF)	2009	International film festival	Kuala Lumpur International Film Festival SBhd and the National Development Film Corporation Malaysia (FINAS)	To develop and promote cooperation amongst filmmakers in the areas of creative, technical and marketing while fostering friendship among countries and

				celebrating the cultural diversity through film.
Kuala Lumpur Experimental Film & Video Festival (KLEX)	2010	International independent experimental film festival	KLEX Committee and SiCKL artist collective	To serve as a platform to introduce contemporary experimental cinema from the region and worldwide to the Malaysian audience and to cultivate understanding, learning, friendship and exchange among local, regional and international experimental film communities.
Kuala Lumpur International Short Film Festival (KLIS)	2012	International short film festival	Malaysian Tourism Board, Media Development Corporation (MDEC), the National Development Film Corporation Malaysia (FINAS)	To celebrate and recognize the excellent creative works by international short filmmakers.
Golden Wau Awards	2012	Malaysian Chinese film festival	Chinese Film Association of Malaysia	To promote local Malaysian Chinese films (loosely modeled on Taiwan's Golden Horse Festival)

It should be noted that in the early years of *Reformasi*, most new film festivals in Indonesia and Malaysia focused on short films (videos) as a popular film form among young people and novice filmmakers. This is understandable since most aspiring filmmakers tend to make a short film as an apt medium for expressing their creative impulses and channeling their spirit of exploration, experimentation and innovation. As a French film theorist André Bazin calls short films as proper arena for “experimental vacation.” Further, he defines the aims of short films as: “to constitute valid element of the cinema spectacle, and to serve as a workshop for young filmmakers” (as cited in Weidenfeld, 2011, p.266). Understandably, short films imply the low budget production, less equipment and more autonomous power and total creative control for filmmakers. Using film festivals as a platform to distribute and exhibit their films, short filmmakers

attempt to hone their cinematic voice and articulate their visions of some hidden aspects of their society, as those subject matters were almost lacking in the mainstream cinema. While short filmmaking in Indonesia allows for aspiring filmmakers living outside the capital Jakarta to express local issues, short filmmaking in Malaysia allows young filmmakers from various ethnic groups articulating their cultural identities through the medium of film as a critical response to the hegemonic Malay(sian) national identity. Seen from the larger context, this is perhaps in tune with what Sophia Siddique Harvey (2007) argues, "Short film production offers Southeast Asian filmmakers an itinerant mode of engaging with the socio-cultural fabric of their respective countries" (p.207).

The recognition of short films in Malaysia had started earlier when the Malaysian Video Award Council organized the Malaysian Video Awards Festival (MVA) in July 2006 although in 1995 FINAS had held a Malaysian Short Films Festival or FfiMa (*Festival Filem Pendek Malaysia*) (Abas, 2006, p.57). In fact, this festival was not limited for Malaysian filmmakers; instead participants in this festival came from the Southeast Asian region that has made this into a prestigious film festival in the region. Some Malaysian short filmmakers such as Amir Muhammad, Bernard Chauhy, Woo Ming Jin, Desmond Hew, Huzir Sulaiman and Teo Jong Yin have been first recognized in this festival before they gained entry into the international film festival circuits. One of the prestigious and highly competitive awards for short films in the MVA is the Experimental Video Award (*Anugerah Video Eksperimental Terbaik*). For indie filmmakers, Malaysian Video Awards (MVA), which began in 1994, is the best venue for showcase for their works. In MVA event some indie filmmakers started to be publicly recognized, particularly when their works received awards such as Bernard Chauhy's *Adam & Steve* (2001), Amir Muhammad's *Pangyau* (2002) and Teo Jong Yin's animation *Coffee-Shop* (2002). Of course, other screenings in various venues (art galleries, cultural centers, university campus) are also the good platform to promote indie films, particularly

among students and young people. Moreover, some indie filmmakers attempted to reach global audience through international film festivals that later raised expectations for quality and creativity in mainstream films.

The initiative of an independent short films festival also emerged from many communities that are not necessarily related to short film. This reflects an enthusiasm in short filmmaking and the need to showcase as well as to further promote short films through film festivals. For instance, the Sol-Jah Syndicate (*Sindiket Sol-Jah*)—a Kuala Lumpur-based writers organization—in cooperation with the National Writers Association (*Persatuan Penulis Nasional Malaysia/PENA*) organizes an annual non-competitive short film festival “Maskara Shorties” (“Maskara” refers to “*Malam Baca Naskhah Sindiket Sol-Jah dan Kawan-Kawan Yang Kita Suka*” or The Book Reading Night of Sindiket Sol-Jah and Their Beloved Friends. As stated in *Sindiket Sol-Jah* official website, “Maskara Shorties is an outdoor film festival screening made by seasoned and fresh filmmakers. It is not a competition, as we want to encourage limitless creativity among filmmakers. Be offbeat, be bold, be what you wanna be” (“Maskara Shorties,” 2011). Started in 2007, this alternative annual film festival invites both novice and professional short filmmakers in Malaysia and Indonesia and Singapore. A variety of film genres such as fiction, documentary, experimental, animation and music video are considered in this festival but the only compulsory criterion is that all films should be no more than 10 minutes in duration. Rather than simply soliciting short films for the festival, members of Sindiket Sol-Jah also actively make their own short films and screen them during the festival. In 2009, the festival attracted 500 viewers and screened 19 short films while in the third year the entries increased to 29 short-films (even 5 shorts from Singapore) with various themes produced by filmmakers who are also in other professions such as writers, editors, graphic designers, painters, cartoonists, and indie musicians (Silang, 2009, p.33. Besides organizing this film festival, Sindiket Sol-Jah also

holds monthly discussions for independent filmmakers in Kuala Lumpur. Another initiative of the short film festival is the Cyberjaya Digital Video Competition (CDVC) that focuses on short video (film) competition. Started in 2004, the aim of this film competition was “to provide young talents with a platform to showcase their creativity in digital video production” (“The Competition,” 2004). The festival has two main categories: “student” and “open” with many types of duration (less than 10, 20, 30 and 60 minutes long). The organizer claimed in 2004 there were 400 entries from young video makers across Malaysia. Interestingly, the organizer uploaded some entries (video length less than 10 and 20 minutes) to the festival website, so everyone can see them through video streaming. Unfortunately, there is no information available on the sustainability of CDVC since its first edition.

As a pioneer film club in Kuala Lumpur, the Malaysian Film Club (*Kelab Seni Filem Malaysia*) regularly screens Malaysian short films (as well as documentary) every four months, although it started screening foreign art house films since 1980s. The screenings usually take place at HELP Institute, Taman Damansara, Kuala Lumpur. The film club provides strong support to local filmmakers, particularly independent filmmakers, through showcasing and promoting them at international film festivals. Besides film screening, the club also organizes film appreciation, workshop and seminar. In 2005 initiated and sponsored by the Goethe-Institut in Kuala Lumpur, the *Kelab Seni Filem Malaysia* with the support of a non-governmental organization Sisters in Islam (SIS) organized a short film competition on the subject of headscarf or *tudung* (Khoo, 2011, p.199). The aim of this competition was to capture the Malaysians’ views toward *tudung* in the context of Malaysian plural society.

Meanwhile, making short film among young people is popular across Indonesia. Since 1999 the Indonesian Independent Film Community (Komunitas Film Independen/Konfiden) started conducting a series of travelling screenings (*pemutaran keliling*) in

many cities at various venues such as art galleries, educational institutions, and foreign cultural centers along with some independent film festivals held within and outside Jakarta, organized by cine clubs or film communities in various cities (mainly in Java and Bali) though only a few survived past their third year. Konfiden also held an annual independent film festival called Festival Video Independen Indonesia (Indonesian Independent Film-Video Festival or FVII) from 1999 to 2002. In the first year of FVII, 72 films were screened, whereas in second and third year of the festival 87 films and 62 films (plus 32 invited films from 7 countries) were screened respectively. After being inactive for four years, in 2006 Konfiden, a former organizer of FVII (Indonesian Independent Film-Video Festival), launched a new national competition called Konfiden Short Film Festival (*Festival Film Pendek Konfiden*). There was also a new short film festival called Slingshort Fest, which showcases Southeast Asian shorts in a competition held at Teater Utan Kayu (TUK), an artist community as well as independent cultural center located in South of Jakarta. In 2006 Konfiden, Slingshort and JiFFest (Jakarta International Film Festival) presented their respective festivals in the last two months of the year in Jakarta, coinciding with the annual FFI and the Yogyakarta Documentary Film Festival (FFD).

Since the collapse of Konfiden Short Film Festival) in 2008, there are independent film festivals in Indonesia such as *Festival Film Solo* (Solo Film Festival or FFS) in Surakarta along with *Festival Film Purbalingga* (Purbalingga Film Festival) that focus on short films competition. Started in 2011, FFS is particularly designed to be a platform for Indonesian short films by presenting awards for the best shorts and providing funds for short film production through proposal pitching. The funding for the short film productions came from the sale of Short Films Compilation (*Kompilasi Fiksi-Pendek-Indonesia*) Volume One produced by FFS with the support of a commercial video distribution, the Jive Collection. Meanwhile, since 2006 Festival Film Purbalingga

promotes short films (fiction and documentary) produced by high school students in the Banyumas Residence (Banyumas Raya) and has special mobile film screenings program (*layar tanjleb keliling*) in the many remote villages in Purbalingga district area.

The euphoric spirit for short filmmaking among young people in Indonesia and Malaysia inevitably attracted some private corporations to hold a short film competition. In Indonesia, a private television station SCTV (Surya Citra Televisi) held Festival Film Independent Indonesia (Indonesian Independent Film Festival or FFII) from 2003 to 2004. With limited publicity only on one TV station, FFII 2003 attracted 1071 entries for both amateur/ novice (*pemula*) and professional, but only 834 films were qualified for the competition and there were 849 entries in the following year (Prakosa, 2005, p.7). Due to uncompromised commercial interest of SCTV, the festival stopped and there was no more film short film festival except FVII organized by Konfiden. Meanwhile, since 2006 an automobile company BMW Group Malaysia run a short film competition called BMW Shorties as “a platform for Malaysian short filmmakers to explore their talents” (“About the BMW Shorties,” n.d.). In this competition, the organizer invited jury from various professions in the film industry such as film star, film director and film producer. Unlike FFII in Indonesia, BMW Shorties still continues until the present with increasing participants (entries). The involvement of private sector (corporates) is crucial to foster short filmmaking since it offers prizes (in the form of funding for the next film project) and the wider publication of the events through mainstream mass media. However, these festivals might serve commercial interests or branding strategy with rhetoric about “nurturing youth creativity” rather than cultivate cinema as both cultural heritage and alternative aesthetic experience.

Despite promoting film appreciation of various film genres, film festivals can be part of advocacy (education) on human rights issues including sexual minority rights in promoting a greater social acceptance of sexual diversity. In 2002, a group of journalists,

advertising agents and cultural bodies, organized the Q Film Festival in Jakarta. As declared by its official website, this is the first ever LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) film festival in any Muslim-majority country (www.q-munity.org). While the festival organizers frequently received threats from conservative Islamist groups like the Islamic Defender Front (FPI), there has been no violence and no edition has been cancelled. The festival is organized independently since it receives neither government support nor corporate sponsorships since the corporations fear that their brand might be damaged. Therefore, it relied on individual donations to Q-Munity (festival organizer) and the foreign cultural agencies in Jakarta (such as Goethe Institut, Erasmus Huis, and Alliance Francais) that offer venues free-of-charge. In order to maintain its sustainability, the festival has strategically established strong ties with the Berlin International Film Festival (particularly Teddy Program) and the Hamburg International Queer Festival and has organized program exchanges with festivals in India and elsewhere in Asia. Of course, the existence of the Q Film Festival is inseparable from the global queer film festival that “owes to the activist media practices and theories of (positive) representation of earlier social movement, particularly women’s and gay liberation and civil rights movement” (Loist & Zielinski, 2012, p.58).

Likewise, in the Malaysian context, an independent film festival is part of an advocacy of human rights issues and encouragement for young filmmakers to actively engage with human rights issues. In November 2003, Freedom Film Festival (Freedom Fest) was launched to steer indie filmmakers in the direction of making social documentaries. Despite screening social documentaries, the organizers also invited local filmmakers through an inaugural competition (with a catchy slogan “Dare to Document”) to make a documentary on the themes of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This festival is organized by a non-governmental organization, Pusat KOMAS (Pusat Komunikasi Masyarakat)-- a community communications center and

video production organization—in order to disseminate social “issues that affect ordinary people such as related to HIV/AIDS, human rights, poverty and environment” which “for commercial reasons are beyond the reach of most Malaysians” (Khoo, 2010, p.140). More than using film as a medium for social change, the festival also attempts to inculcate “the spirit of film activism among the current generation of cinemagoers and filmmakers” (Khoo, 2010, p.140).

Another film festival with obvious political agenda in raising a critical awareness of the history of Malaysia was The Emergency Festival from 16 to 26 October 2008 at the Annexe at Central Market (Kuala Lumpur). The aim of the festival was to offer “an intriguing re-examination and creative storytelling of the Malayan Emergency featuring works by local arts practitioners, filmmakers and intellectuals.” Although film screenings and the following discussion were only part of the program of the Emergency Festival, they exposed the Malaysian audience to rare films, propaganda and documentation made by the Communist guerilla during and after Emergency as well as anti-Communist propaganda clips from the Emergency period (1948-1960). In fact, the idea of this festival partly was sparked by Fahmi Reza’s political documentary entitled *10 Tahun Sebelum Merdeka* (10 Years Before Independence, 2007) that tells the people’s democratic movement in Malaya (commonly called as “*hartal*”) on 20 October 1947 against the undemocratic Malaya Constitutional Proposals devised by the British Colonial Government and United Malay National Organization (UMNO). In this festival Fahmi Reza provides a live commentary of his documentary entitled *Revolusi '48* (The 1948 Revolution, 2008) that recast the Emergency as a largely forgotten anti-colonial revolution launched against the British Colonial Government. He also shared his experiences in the making of his documentary, the process of tracking down the former guerillas and his subjects, and amusing anecdotes about his personal journey to reconstruct the 1948 Revolution from idea to completion.

While some independent film festivals are still centred in Jakarta, there are others that spread out across many cities in Indonesia. One of the cities with a vibrant art scene, and which has a film festival, is Yogyakarta (443 kilometers east of Jakarta) that has been home to many famous Indonesian artists. In 2001, students, cultural and art activists supported by education and cultural institutions initiated the Yogyakarta Documentary Film Festival (FFD) focusing on both amateur and professional documentary films. Initially, FFD aims to give opportunities to young people to learn documentary, but now it serves as a platform for documentary films and a meeting point for independent documentary filmmakers. From the beginning of the festival, the number of entries slowly increased which signalled a lukewarm interest of young people to make documentary film compared to feature or fiction film. It only attracted 30 amateur filmmakers when the festival started in 2002, and after 5 years in 2007, it attracted 58 participants (26 amateurs and 32 professionals). The backgrounds of participants are quite diverse: cine club activists, independent filmmakers, NGO activists, underground musicians, television contributors, and students of film schools. There are very limited numbers of participants from outside Java due to the limited reach of publicity about the festival and the lack of film schools and other facilities outside Java. Unfortunately, the festival does not release a compilation of the best documentaries in FFD, hence, the best documentaries or the winners of FFD are still inaccessible to a wider audience in Indonesia. FFD has seven regular programs: (1) film screenings; (2) film competition; (3) discussions/ seminars; (4) workshop (now known as “master class”); (5) film clinics (consultation with filmmakers and film scholars); (6) “schooldocs” (film appreciation for junior and senior high school students); and (7) community gatherings (*temu komunitas*). In particular, in community gatherings during the festival, many film communities from different cities in Indonesia such as Bandung, Yogyakarta, Semarang and Makassar interact and share their experiences and problems to seek solutions based on their local

conditions. Such meetings address gaps of knowledge and information, particularly between film communities in Java and Outer Islands and between big and small cities in Indonesia.

Although most independent film festivals concentrated in Jakarta and other big cities like Yogyakarta and Bandung, a group of young people (mostly university students) in a small town of Purwokerto (400 kilometers east of Jakarta and part of Central Java Province) initiated a mini film festival called *Pesta Sinema Indonesia* (Indonesian Cinema Party or PSI) in 2002 focusing on local films with various genres selected from other Indonesian city (Jayasarana, 2007, p.115). The festival aimed to provide a variety of references of Indonesian films (outside of mainstream) to the local audiences. Choosing a small café as festival venue, the organizer used three television monitors to screen the movies in the daytime, whereas in the night they used a digital video projector. In the one-day festival only 70 people attended to this event, but in the following year (2003), the organizer extended to a two-day event and rented Universitas Jenderal Soedirman auditorium in which it successfully attracted 700 people (Jayasrana, 2007, pp.115-16). Despite regular film screenings, this festival held a video production workshop, post-screening discussion and published fanzines. Unfortunately, in 2005 PSI ended due to funding difficulties, although it attracted 1,500 people (mostly high school and university students) during its two-day event that screened more than 12 films. However, PSI has successfully encouraged the birth of five to seven film communities or collective groups in Purwokerto that were actively making films and organizing film screenings. Meanwhile, after PSI ended one of the festival initiators, Dimas Jayasrana established a film screening project called "Kultur Visual" (Visual Culture) for street children in Jakarta that aimed to provide a new visual experience beyond dominant television culture and to stimulate creative way of thinking by screening foreign (French) animations and Indonesian short films.

The presence of film communities, which became a catalyst for a grassroots film festival, can be found in many small cities across Indonesia. Since all movie theatres have closed down in Cianjur (120 kilometers southeast of Jakarta and part of the West Java Province) in 2004, the ritual of watching film collectively at the movie theatre as well as film culture gradually disappeared in society. In order to revive film culture in Cianjur, a group of young people led by Saeful Adha established Komunitas Lensa Creatifilm in 2005 (Fitrianto, 2010, para 4). Using a DVD player and a digital projector with simple screen, this community holds regular film screenings fortnightly. There are at least 500 people who attend each film screening of both foreign and local films during two to three sessions. This community held two editions of "Festival Film Pelajar" (Student Film Festival) that has given out a "pare" award ("pare" is Sundanese for "paddy") for best short film. According to the coordinator of Komunitas Lensa Creatifilm, Saeful Adha, the aim of this festival is to encourage young people (student) to make their own films rather than merely complain over the quality of commercial films and watch poor quality movies (Fitrianto, 2010, para 5). Of course, Komunitas Lensa Craetifilm is one example of various independent film communities across Indonesia such as MataKaca community in Solo (Central Java Province), Artea Film Community in Palembang (South Sumatera Province), Sources of Indonesia or SOI in Medan (North Sumatera Province), Kine Wakref in Pekanbaru (Riau Province, Sumatera), and the like (Fitrianto, 2010, para.3).

Rather than simply forming a forum (club) for film appreciation and discussion, some film communities are also actively making films and showing in various film festivals both local and international. Recently, Komunitas Limaenam Films, one of the film communities in Yogyakarta, is actively making films. BW Purbanegara's short film *Musafir* (Wanderers, 2009) from Komunitas Limaenam Films participated in the Berlin International Film Festival in 2009 and Yosep Anggi Noen's short film *Hujan Tak Jadi*

Datang (It's Not Raining Outside, 2010) screened in the Rotterdam International Film Festival in 2010 and the Singapore International Film Festival in the same year. Film communities seem like a training ground for independent filmmakers to nurture their independence before they step into the film industry. As one of the founders of Komunitas Limaenam Films, Yosep Anggi Noen remarks, "Up to now, I choose not to step into the film industry because I want to empower my [bargaining] position as a filmmaker. Therefore, once I step into a film industry I already have a stronger [bargaining] position and I will not be co-opted by the capital"²⁹ (Fitrianto, 2010, para. 14).

Established in 2006, the Filmmakers Anonymous (FA) is a loose community in Malaysia for those who want to make a short film without any constraint to genre. As stated in its Facebook page, Filmmakers Anonymous accommodates "an array of new emerging films; compiled not curated, from among like-minded people who are just addicted to making films—for whatever noble or twisted reasons" ("About Filmmakers Anonymous," n.d.). On 4 February 2012, Filmmakers Anonymous held a Mini Symposium with Wong Fu Productions at the Taylor's University Lakeside, Bandar Sunway, attended by more than 300 young people. Two co-founders of Wong Fu Productions, Philip Wong and Ted Fu shared their experiences in establishing their company that has produced many popular short films on YouTube channel. They also explained some practical tips and tricks on how to make a short film that fits with the YouTube format. In the symposium, the organizer screened the winners of the "Filmmakers Anonymous Short Films Competition" limited to a 2-minute duration and utilise Wong Fu's films as their inspiration. Mobilizing the network among young people via social media (Facebook and Twitter), Filmmakers Anonymous regularly

²⁹ "Saya sendiri sampai sekarang memilih belum masuk ke industri karena ingin memperkuat posisi saya dulu sebagai filmmaker. Sehingga suatu saat saya masuk ke industri, posisi saya sudah cukup kuat untuk terkooptasi oleh modal."

organize workshops on script writing (*Bengkel Menulis Skrip*) with some independent filmmakers in Central Market (Kuala Lumpur) and other venues.

Independent film communities in Indonesia, are linked by networks through which they share their problems and discuss issues related to independent films. For instance, from 17 to 20 March 2010, 162 people from 45 film communities held *Konggres Kegiatan Perfilman Berbasis Komunitas* (Congress of Community-Based Film Activities) in Solo (Central Java). This congress discussed some pertinent issues in film communities such as community capacity building, collaborative programs, financial resource, networks maintenance, and other issues related to the sustainability of film communities. In the early years of the independent film movement, there were about 75 film communities across Indonesia involved in various activities such as filmmaking, screening and distribution (Jayasrana, 2007, p.117), although some communities gradually moved and disbanded due to the nature of membership. Since most members of film communities are university students, the collective normally disbands after they graduate from university. Another reason for the decreasing film communities is due to the lack of sustainability in filmmaking and distribution. However, some film communities like Komunitas Limaenam Films in Yogyakarta and Cinema Lovers Community (CLC) in Purbalingga still consistently produce short films and participate in both local and international film festivals. In particular, CLC actively facilitate high school students to make films (fiction or documentary) based on their own experiences in their milieu.

Clearly, various film festivals have stimulated a vibrant film culture both in Indonesia and Malaysia due to the diminishing movie theatres in small cities in Indonesia and the need for an alternative site for film's circulation and exhibition outside the commercial circuit. Most of these film festivals (especially the small and independent festivals) screen all films in a digital format either indoor or outdoor.

However, the different characters of film festivals in Indonesia and Malaysia above reflect their diverse aims and audiences. For instance, themed-festivals, which promote and advocate human rights issues, such as Q! Film Festival in Jakarta, Yogyakarta Documentary Film festival and Freedom Film Festival in Kuala Lumpur suggest the communion between film festival and activism and its function as a performative platform. In particular, post-screening discussions with filmmakers and film subjects “might provide some additional information, connect the audience with activist programs and extend the emotional engagement into off-screen space” (Torchin, 2012, p.7-8). In other words, film festivals are sites for cultivating alliances and for mounting campaigns that can enhance a film’s impact.

It is noteworthy that like indie film festivals in America and Europe, in Indonesia and Malaysia, indie film festivals perform particular social functions, by bringing people together in the events that provide networking opportunities and a sense of collective endeavor and being part of larger indie community. However, indie films festivals in Indonesia and Malaysia do not operate as markets in which films might find buyers and distributors like Sundance Film Festival. Instead they operate as competition for awards or honors and appreciation of alternative film genres. While film festivals are still an important and alternative site for film exhibition, the Internet increasingly emerges to provide a new venue for both film distribution and exhibition beyond a commercial film circuit, and this will be discussed extensively in the following section.

The Internet as a New and Open Platform for Film Distribution and Exhibition

The Internet opens up more possibilities to distribute and exhibit films that are able to overcome many entry barriers in the film economy as well as political restriction (film censorship). In particular, Internet is increasingly becoming a viable distribution platform for indie filmmakers in dealing with either film distributors or exhibitors and

the less established independent distribution network. This platform is not only an apt choice for small budget indie film productions, but also for films with critical (political) contents. Furthermore, in the broader context, the Internet not only caters for special interests of audience by making available a wide range of classic and contemporary non-mainstream cinema, it also allows audiences far from the metropolitan hubs to gain open access to films that were previously out of reach for them. Therefore, “young cinephiles who live in the cinematically less well-travelled regions (South-East Asia, Eastern Europe, the Middle East) are able to consider the films of their home countries with a level of depth and detail that visiting [film] programmers and critic can never muster” (Slater, 2007, p.27). This section illustrates the role of the Internet in the new film economy ecology facilitated by the digital technology particularly in the field of film distribution and exhibition.

Prior to the rise of the Internet as an alternative distribution system, distribution has been a chronic problem in Indonesian and Malaysian cinema. For instance, since *Studio 21* in Indonesia has monopolized the film theatre chains in Indonesia, there are no “real” film distributors as mediating agents between film producers and film theater owners (personal interview with J.B. Kristanto, 25 November 2011). As a result, Indonesian film producers should take a role as film distributors as they need to promote and deal with cinema owners, particularly to get their time slots for screenings.³⁰ Not surprisingly, some film producers approached a cinema owner directly and asked for a screening slot even before their film production began in order to secure

³⁰ Due to the rise of private TV stations (10 free terrestrial TV stations) in Indonesia and the spread of pirated VCDs and DVDs (now the popularity of online media), the number of movie theaters as well as attendance decreases dramatically. For instance, according to the Indonesian Cinema Owners Association (*Gabungan Pengusaha Bioskop Seluruh Indonesia* or GPBSI) in 1998 the number of movie theaters was 1,280 with 1,988 screens, while in 2002 the number of movie theaters was 264 with 676 screens (Irawanto, 2004, p.106). On February 2013 the number of movie theaters decline (162 cinemas), but the number of screens slightly increase (721 screens) as most of cinema becomes a multiplex (usually with 5-7 screens rather than a single screen). The majority of movie theaters are located in the Java Island (79.63%), and the rest are located in many major islands such as Sumatera (7.41%), Kalimantan (4.94%) and Sulawesi (3.09%) (Ramadani, 2013).

their film distribution process.³¹ Interestingly, there are no responsibilities of film theatre owners in promoting the film to attract audiences. In general film producers place a small advertisement in the print media or if they have a considerable budget they would place a trailer on commercial television.

Indeed, dealing with an owner of cinema is not only time consuming, but, most importantly, costly. As a result, independent filmmakers try to avoid dealing with the owner of commercial film theaters since they do not have any budget allocated for promotion (advertisements) as well as distribution. Moreover, this situation is even more difficult as the number of digital cinema are very limited in Malaysia. Malaysian indie filmmaker Deepak Kumaran Menon recounts how he faced a poor bargaining position when he dealt with the film theatre owner to screen his first feature-length *Chemman Chaalai* (The Gravel Road, 2005). Deepak had to pay upfront a film screening rental whether his film will succeed or totally flop (interview with Deepak Kumaran Menon, 10 February 2012). Likewise, the Indonesian independent filmmaker Aria Kusumadewa faced difficulties to show his film *Beth* (2002) in cinemas since there was only one movie theater (in Pondok Indah, South Jakarta) with a digital projector during that time.³²

In general, indie filmmakers in Indonesia and Malaysia simply tour their films from one venue to another across the country sometimes with a cheap entrance ticket or totally free of charge. For instance, the producer of indie film *Gedebe* (dir. Namron, 2003), Rosihan Zain Baharudin, admitted that *Gedebe* was screened in an open space at

³¹ According to Ferry Angriawan, a producer of Virgo Putra Film, he needs to wait almost 6 months before his film *The Sexy City* (2010) can be screened at the Studio 21 theatres (Fitrianto & Khoiri, 2010, para 1). Given the monopoly of the Studio 21 group, some surviving movie theatres in small cities in Java (such as Brebes, Tegal and Purwokerto) completely rely on the film distributor PT Sanggar Film that works for the Studio 21 group. Given the monopoly of the Studio 21 group, some surviving movie theatres in small cities in Java (such as Brebes, Tegal and Purwokerto) completely rely on the film distributor PT Sanggar Film that works for the Studio 21 group.

³² At that time, the operator of Movie Theater in Pondok Indah told Aria Kusumadewa to rent a digital projector, if he still wanted to screen his film. The cost for renting a digital projector during that time was 2.5 million Rupiah per day and 6 million Rupiah for six days (van Heeren, 2012, p.62).

the Yayasan Kesenian Perak and only attracted 87 fans who paid RM 10 for a ticket before it traveled to other places such as Kuala Lumpur and Petaling Jaya (Awang, 2003b, p.59). Although only limited audience watched *Gedebe* as it was released in non-commercial circuit, the reception of *Gedebe* indicated that indie film has its own audience. The problem of indie films to get a commercial release in film theatre lies in their digital format that needs more money to be transferred into celluloid (35mm) format. For instance, the production of *Gedebe* costs RM 20,000, while it needs more than RM 100,000 for transferring into celluloid (35 mm) format. Therefore, indie filmmakers tend to by pass screening their works at the commercial movie theatres as well as submitting to film censorship board. The only exception probably is *Gedebe*, which was submitted to the censor board simply to test the limit of the freedom of expression. But it finally passed the censor. University campus, art galleries and art centers become the main alternatives venues for independent film producers to exhibit their films. Of course, the independent distribution is a common practice among independent filmmakers across the world since their films do not fit inside the commercial distribution model or they simply do not want to. As *The New York Times* film critic Manohla Dargis remarks, "For some stubborn independents D.I.Y. [Do It Yourself] distribution has at times been either the best or only option."

Of course, film festivals can be an important channel for distribution as well as exhibition, particularly for independent films. Mainstream film producers usually see the film festival as outside of the distribution chain or a precursor to distribution when a screening in the film festivals gets it through the distribution. However, in the new disintermediated set-up, film festivals become a key element of the film's circulation (Iordanova, 2012, p.17). This is because once a film festival becomes a site for the direct exhibition of film; it also receives the chance to network closer to other film festivals. As the node of networks, film festivals play an important role in the cycle of do-it-yourself

filmmaking and distribution. Circulation particularly through the activist film circuit generates sufficient word-of-mouth to establish reputation and enables them to sell DVD copies directly out of websites as well as to plan further film projects.

Overcoming the commercial distribution circuit, some independent filmmakers in Indonesia have attempted to distribute their films by making a compilation and selling through “distro” (independent clothing and music shops)³³. Most independent film communities developed a consignment system with *distro* as well as other alternative outlets such as bookstores in order to supply a small number of copies according to the existing demand. For instance, The Marshall Plan, an independent DVD label designed specifically for Indonesian alternative films (mostly short films), has been producing a compilation that it distributes through its own networks and screening programs since 2008 (Juliastuti, et.al, 2011, p. 186). Meanwhile, in Malaysia, the independent digital filmmakers sell their DVDs through the independent bookshop such as Silverfish Books that sells both alternative international and local literature while located in the vibrant nightlife area of the Bangsar district. Since Silverfish Books has literate customers, DVDs of independent filmmakers sold in this shop will reach the appropriate audience.

Meanwhile, VideoBattle in Yogyakarta, has been circulating its video compilations as disc sets since 2004. (Juliastuti, et al, 2011, p. 186). They select and compile five-minute videos from entries of different styles (predominantly experimental videos) in order to challenge the conventional ‘genre.’ Of course, this format is deliberately chosen by VideoBattle due to its accessibility and low production. Not

³³ The word “distro” is an acronym for “distribution store” or “distribution outlet” which is popular in the late 1990s in Indonesia. Initially distro set up by independent bands in Bandung (146 kilometers southern of Jakarta and the capital of West Java Province) where they can sell their CDs, T-shirts, stickers and other accessories for their loyal fans outside the venue of their performance. In its development, distro becomes an outlet for other independent communities (including indie film community) to sell their unique and “authentic” product since all items produced in a small scale and hand-made in order to retain their independent character. For more comprehensive and excellent study on the development of distro and its relationship with the larger indie scene in Indonesia, see Luvaas (2012).

surprisingly, the video-makers are encouraged to duplicate and sell copies of the compilation for their own profit. By open endorsement of duplication, this system has contributed to its recognition by the global audience.

Meanwhile, organizations like Bali-based Minikino (established in 2002) and Jakarta-based Boemboe (established in 2003) focus on primarily distributing short films internationally without government support. In general, short filmmakers are dependent on film organizations and communities to get their films seen outside their cities. Grassroot distribution is the usual method as film communities swap programs with one another during their regular film events or road shows throughout Indonesia. One example is Independent Film Surabaya (INFIS) with their annual Sulasifest (for 13-minute entries), as well as their routine monthly film screenings in the French Cultural Center of Surabaya. Another alternative distribution is by making VCD/DVD format and selling underground in which Minikino and Boemboe have already done. It is noteworthy that many difficulties in obtaining funds for production and distribution are the key reasons why only a few short filmmakers are able to consistently make a film.

The independent distribution model in which independent filmmakers or producers selling their own works in the form of hard copy VCDs or DVDs face some problems. The first problem is the economic value of the small scale of video reproduction. According to Dimas Jayasrana, The Marshall Plan video distributor, "The DVD products need to have a minimum of 1000 copies, meaning they need to be pressed commercially instead of duplicated on a small scale." (Juliastuti et al, 2011, p.186). The second problem is closely related to the government regulations on tax and censorship. As Dimas Jayasrana admits, "All products [videos] need to have attached ribbon issued by the Film Censorship Board" (Juliastuti et al, 2011, p.186). Clearly, film censorship becomes a barrier in circulating alternative films to public. However, ignoring the government regulations, some independent film distributors such as MiniKino,

Boemboe Forum, HelloMotion and Fourcoloursfilm choose to tap into existing distribution networks (“distro” and other alternative outlets) through the consignment system. While this model may resolve the bureaucratic challenges of legal legitimacy, this model does not necessarily enable filmmakers to support themselves financially.

To escape from the eye of film censorship, Malaysian indie filmmakers collaboratively made a short film project on Malaysian politics and society entitled *15 Malaysia* produced by indie music composer Pete Teo. The anthology consists of 15 short films and features some prominent Malaysian artists as well as politicians, distributed and exhibited through Internet. The compilation of shorts is perhaps suitable for the online platform since it is less time consuming to watch and gives freedom to the Internet users to choose the film that suits them. Most importantly, showing films on Internet easily transgresses the strict censorship regulation in Malaysia. Since its first launch in August 2009, the official website of *15 Malaysia* had 14 million visits in less than two months and its YouTube Channel³⁴ became the 10th most watched channel in the world for more than three weeks.

As is well known, the fundamental characteristic of a digital era is when images are easily transferable across multiple platforms (Romes, 2009, p.129). Among the

³⁴ YouTube is a video-sharing website created by three former PayPal employees (Char Hurley, Steven Chen and Javeed Karim) in February 2005, on which users are able to upload, view and share videos. However, some scholars see YouTube more than a website but rather a platform, an archive, a library, a laboratory, a “parasitical media,” a “networked individualism” and a “storyteller for the digital age” (Kavoori, 2011, p.3). Only registered users can upload their video to YouTube and view some restricted contents. While most content on YouTube has been uploaded by individuals, some media corporations (i.e. CBS, BBC, Vevo and Hulu) and other organizations deliver some of their materials through the site as part of the YouTube partnership program. Since YouTube restrict the duration of uploaded videos (10-15 minutes) due to the limited size of file, most registered users upload a short video (film) in different forms (i.e. home video, video diary/ journal, video series, fiction, documentary, animation, music video, advertisement and the like) though most viewed, responded, discussed reflect “popular culture elements of interest to young people” (Kavoori, 2011, p.4). YouTube has been ranked as the third most visited website on the Internet, behind Google and Facebook. From 19 June 2007 onwards the interface of the website is available with localized versions in 57 countries (including Malaysia and Indonesia) that might cause some videos cannot be viewed in particular countries due to the copyright restrictions or inappropriate contents. In 2008, YouTube began migration to long form content and added High Definition widescreen.

various platforms, Internet is probably the most convenient and popular in distributing and exhibiting films or videos in the digital format due to the closure of many movie theaters in small cities in Indonesia. For instance, Cinema Lovers Community (CLC) in Purbalingga (400 kilometers east of Jakarta) has uploaded their 71 videos (including trailer, teaser and promotion) into YouTube Channel. Since film theatres do not exist in Purbalingga, this act has helped to extend the circulation of their videos and popularize the issues being raised despite some mobile film screenings (*layar tancap*) across villages in Purbalingga. Most CLC's films are about the local issues such as the banning of free film screenings in a particular government building and the broken promises of the district head (*bupati*) after he was elected. In particular, the 19-minute documentary film entitled *Bupati (tak pernah) Ingkar Janji* (The Broken Promises of the Head of District, 2012) directed by Bowo Leksono has caused a legal issue since the head of district of Purbalingga (Heru Sudjatmoko) threatened the filmmakers by bringing them to the court (Haryadi & Hernawan, 2012).

Likewise, in order to open up free access to their films, Doghouse 73 Pictures, James Lee's production house that recently won an award for Best Content at WWWOW Awards 2014, uploaded some notable Malaysian indie films such as Amir Muhammad's *Big Durian* (2003), James Lee's *Snipers* (2001), *The Beautiful Washing Machine* (2004) and *Bernafas Dalam Lumpur* (Breathing in the Mud, 2007) into YouTube channel. Besides feature films, Doghouse 73 Pictures also uploaded short films (action and experimental), television drama, music videos, behind the scene and movie trailers into YouTube channel. By providing free access to Malaysian indie films, it allows audiences to see indie Malaysian films that have no chance of commercial release in movie theatres or only have limited screenings. In return, indie filmmakers are able to know the number of audiences and get the audience's responses instantly. To promote their films globally Da Huang Pictures—a film collective based in Kuala Lumpur, and established in 2004 by

Malaysian filmmakers (Amir Muhammad, James Lee, Tan Chui Mui, Liew Seng Tat)—also uploaded some movie trailers into YouTube channel. Previously, they distributed their films worldwide through their own web shop. Meanwhile, Amir Muhammad's *The Last Communist* was distributed by Red Films to the American market through Customflicks, an online scheme that allows artists to self-publish books, DVDs, CDs, video download and MP3 on-demand via Amazon.com and other online merchants.

Indonesian Film Center (IdFilmcenter) is probably the only film portal (website) that is exclusively dedicated to Indonesian films modeling itself on the famous Internet Movie Database (IMDb)³⁵ for movie facts, news, promotional material, online distribution and exhibition. This portal is made “to promote Indonesian film and video works in Indonesia and to global audience” (www.indonesianfilmcenter.com). There are four main sections in this portal namely: (1) **Film Box**: exhibits 25-minute videos for free and allows registered users to upload their videos in any form (short films, animation, film trailer, video clip and promotion); (2) **Film Info**: provides variety of information on feature-length films (at least 60 minutes duration) both fiction and documentaries produced from 1926 to the present to facilitate networking between Indonesian and international filmmakers; (3) **Film Shop**: online film store in which registered users are able to buy Indonesian films in VCD and DVD format or rent and watch it online through video streaming; (4) **Film Chat**: facilitates interaction/communication between filmmakers and their audience, between junior and senior filmmakers, and between Indonesian and international film enthusiasts; (5) **Film**

³⁵ IMDb started in 1990 when Col Nedham, a computer engineer working for Hawlett-Packard in Bristol, decided to post bulletin board database called rec.art.movies.movie. This database was devoted to movie credits and, according to Nedham, was the outcome of seeing too many films and losing track of information such as which actors starred in particular movies (Fischer, 2012a). The desire to make database was partly rooted from his childhood familiarity with programming and from the need to avoid paper-based catalogue due to its physical limitations like one-sidedness of information. Interestingly, IMDb is one example of crowdsourced resource where majority of information about international cinema has been contributed by volunteer based across the world.

Archive: documents/ archives all materials about Indonesian images in the form of footages of historical events in Indonesia (currently it has footages from 1920s to 1965). IdFilmcenter is run by the Indonesian Film Center Foundation (Tika Makarim, Lisabona Rahman, Suryani Liauw, Peter Aquilina and Orlow Seunke) and supported by other Indonesia film organizations such as HelloMotion, Konfiden and In-Docs. Despite promoting Indonesian films to global audience, the aim of IdFilmcenter Foundation is “to save the [Indonesian] film from deterioration and ultimately vanishing” and to be “virtual film museum” of Indonesian audiovisual heritage (Seunke, 2012).

However, online distribution and exhibition through the Internet is not without problems. The broadband limitation and the need to lower the cost of Internet access as well as the increasing size of video files have been the main concerns of film activists. In addition, the fear of negative impact of Internet and ‘moral panic’ among people in the village may hamper the intention to make the Internet as a common platform for film exhibition. As Kampung Halaman co-founder Dian Herdiany observed how members of some of the communities they work with (particularly parents) refused the group’s proposal to install Internet facilities in their village by citing the risk of exposing pornographic materials to the young people (Juliastuti et al., 2011, p.188). Another activist from Kawanusa community in Bali, Yoga, pointed out that the inequality in access to information technology might establish imbalanced power relations between information “have” and “have-not.” He further posed some critical questions regarding the online video (film) distribution: “Why publish the video online? They [local video activists] don’t know who is accessing them. If we insist on doing so, who will actually benefit? Of course, the answer is: those who are already literate” (Juliastuti et al., 2011, p.189). This leads many grassroots activists to prioritize offline rather than online connections in which films are collectively appreciated at the sites where they are made.

Putting aside some problems related to online distribution in the Indonesian

context, there are many benefits that can be gleaned from this online distribution. **Firstly**, online distribution has direct access to the viewers without any intermediary chains like a distributor and exhibitor. Rather than reaching out to mass audiences, online distribution may reach the core as well as crossover audiences. Moreover, online distribution as well as exhibition invites audiences to participate actively by giving their comments, reviews or recommendation on films (videos) that they just watched on the Internet. While some film audiences still enjoy the ritual of going out to watch films, others do not want their entertainment in theaters, but rather “preferring to immerse themselves in a media-saturated world across variety of platforms” (Dargis, 2010b, para 10). In the digital era, young audiences are less interested with particular format and authentic viewing experience since they are, using film critic David Denby’s term, a “platform agnostic.” A platform agnostic watches films on the Internet, on television, on screen of all sizes without distinguishing these experiences in terms of value and authenticity. Moreover, being able to access content on demand is the most important to them (Newman, 2014, p. 87). **Secondly**, unlike conventional distribution system, online distribution puts filmmakers in control that overtakes the powerful control of distributor in the film’s circulation. As a result, the smaller players now come to be on par with the bigger players. Although the big players may still exert their power of control over the international theatrical releases, “they no longer possess an efficient means of barring alternative content from seeking exposure on the Internet” (Iordanova, 2012a, p. 7). **Thirdly**, online distribution through the Internet allows for flexible film release strategies since there is no distributor who controls the order of the platform onto which a film will be released and the timing or the sequence of such a release (Iordanova, 2012a, p.5). In addition, a video sharing website like YouTube accelerates the film’s dissemination often resulting in a hybrid model whereby films are shown in the festival also makes its way to the Internet, where they can be seen by those who reach them

through word-of-mouth, to ensure the widest possible dissemination.

Conclusion

There are at least four main conclusions that can be drawn from this chapter. **Firstly**, the digital technology, that embodies democratization spirit, has facilitated the proliferation of filmmaking among young people both in Indonesia and Malaysia. The “revolution” of digital technology in filmmaking is politically important since it shifts the power of film production from the producers or capital owners to filmmakers themselves and liberates filmmakers from the logic of market or capital that dictates the formulaic narratives they should follow obediently in order to serve the market. The digital technology provides a sense of autonomous position among filmmakers since they are able to bypass the complicated career paths in the film industry in Indonesia and Malaysia. Also, it offers narrative possibilities with plenty of room for experimentation and improvisation. Not surprisingly, the digital technology encourages young people to express their own narratives and hence empowers them in articulating their subjectivity and creatively and politically dealing with their immediate social milieu. In short, digital cinema provides an alternative avenue for political emancipation through the democratization of filmmaking.

Secondly, digital technology has been an impetus for the emergence of “new generation” in Indonesian and Malaysian cinema. The accessibility, affordability and flexibility of digital technology allows young filmmakers to explore and experiment with the medium; hence, they are able to tackle various themes or issues in society, which have been considered taboo or too risky for conventional film business, and to develop an alternative film narrative. While new generation of Malaysian filmmakers reflect the ethnic pluralism, the new generation of Indonesian filmmakers shows the diversity of their social origins and locations ranging from urban (Jakarta-centered) middle class to

local middle class though both equally well-educated.

Thirdly, many independent and grassroots film festivals have fostered a vibrant film culture across Indonesia and Malaysia. In particular, independent film festivals organized by film communities or non-governmental organizations become not only a showcase for the finest films or a platform for alternative works of young filmmakers but also nurture a wide appreciation of the local films even for the audience outside the capital of Jakarta and Kuala Lumpur. Furthermore, the proliferation of independent film festivals at the small cities in Indonesia has shifted Jakarta as a center of film production, exhibition and consumption. More importantly, these local film festivals have revived public film culture due to the collapse of many movie theatres and the rampant VCDs and DVDs piracy. The independent spirit that embodies many grassroots and independent film festivals has restored the original purpose of film festivals as a forum for genuine film appreciation without any inflection of the interests of government and film industries. Also, some film festivals have provided decent funding for young and novice filmmakers through competition that may guarantee more sustainable independent short film production. Meanwhile, various film communities in Indonesia have become a crucial training ground for young filmmakers due to the limited opportunities (as well as expensive fees) to study at film schools and the availability of open resources for learning to make a film independently facilitated by the Internet.

Fourthly, given the chronic problem of film distribution and oligopolistic structure of film industry in Indonesia and Malaysia, most independent filmmakers choose the Internet as an apt platform for distribution and exhibition. This open platform (and now along with the rise of “file sharing”) is politically significant since it cuts against the grain of dominant (oligopolistic) systems of film distribution and exhibition in Indonesia and Malaysia and emphasizes the radical potential of autonomous use of channel for cultural circulation. In addition, the ability of film

audience to access films freely and directly without the necessity of going to the film theatre or buying VCDs/ DVDs has bypassed the fundamentally current capitalist system of distribution and exhibition for profit, thus infringing the system of copyrights designed to protect corporate interest and ensure capital accumulation. Moreover, the direct and open access to films without any intervention of film censorship might provide the audiences with not only an honest and unconventional film narrative, but also expose the wider possibilities of film narratives on politically “sensitive” issues in Indonesian and Malaysian society. In the next chapter I will explore in detail the filmic representation and narrative of contemporary Indonesian and Malaysian cinema in imagining the utopian and dystopian conditions of Indonesian and Malaysian society.

CHAPTER 3

IMAGINING UTOPIA/DYSTOPIA: RELIGION, RACE AND SEXUALITY IN INDIE CINEMA

*Cinema's capacity to witness, to-be-there-in-the-present,
having almost disappeared for a while, find itself with obligation
to invent imaginary world, to explore the mental.*

Serge Daney (2007, p.99)

*[We] know all too well that by the 'magic of cinema'
even the most unbearable conceivable.*

Abbas Kiarostami (2007, p. xii)

*We are the orphans of the idea of revolution.
As a result, we often think that no victory is possible anymore,
the world has lost its illusion, and we eventually become resigned.*

*Cinema, however, says in its own way:
"There are victories even in the worst of worlds."*

Alain Badiou (2013, p.232)

This chapter is about the imagery of contemporary Indonesian and Malaysian independent cinema since the 1998 *Reformasi* period characterized by an open political climate yet paradoxically marked by the persistence of religious conservatism. While Chapter 2 laid out the ground for the proliferation of filmmaking facilitated by digital technology in broadening the political horizon in the new found of democratic climate, this chapter specifically focuses on the way both Indonesian and Malaysian filmmakers imagine or construct the cinematic imageries of their society amidst the undergoing political transition and social transformations. Rather than simply analyzing formal elements of film texts, in this chapter I intersect the text, the agency and the context; oscillating between cinematographic images, filmmaker' subjectivity and social

practices. Therefore, this chapter interweaves socio-cultural contexts of film production (including the vision of filmmakers/producers) with film narrative in order to understand not only the signature of filmmakers' style, but also their political resonances in Indonesian and Malaysian society. In this chapter I argue that cinematic imageries are not passively mirroring contemporary Indonesian and Malaysian society, but rather they are actively projecting the imagination or fantasy of society "becoming" democratic and egalitarian which transcends the existing socio-political conditions and even creates an inversion of a present. Contemporary Indonesian and Malaysian indie films carve out a social utopia by showing how a utopia might be conceived and developed from dystopian imaginings.¹ More importantly, indie films practice, using Jacques Rancière's (1998) term, the "political of part-taking" (*avoir-part*) that reconfigures the perceptual disposition of sight and sounds by representing those who are excluded ("the part of no part") from the fields of the visible and audible.

To flesh out my above argument this chapter will be divided into three interrelated sections. The first section examines the latent problem of religious and racial pluralism as represented by contemporary films in Indonesia and Malaysia. While religious and racial differences have always shaped the political landscapes of Indonesia and Malaysia, currently religious and racial pluralism takes a new dimension since the emerging power of "conservatism" brought about by an intensification of "Islamization"² which challenges the idea of pluralism that is regarded a Western

¹ I understand utopia (places of perfection that might do not exist) and dystopia (places with worst conditions or a wretched kind of life) in a dialectic tension rather than mutually exclusive and alienated. Therefore, cinematic imageries in contemporary Indonesian and Malaysian cinema can be understood as the nexus of utopian-dystopian dialectics. In other world, utopia and dystopia should be imagined as "two sides of the same coin." Indeed, the future of utopia is unpredictable, but it all depends on the dialectics tension between utopia and dystopia. Criticizing utopia will lead to dystopia, while there is utopia behind any observation of dystopia.

² While Islamization in Indonesian and Malaysian context is commonly understood as "a process of deepening commitment to standards of normative belief, practice and religious identity" (Ricklefs, 2012, p.516), it is also characterized by "regressive thinking" and simply a "reproduction of archaic and patriarchal forms of subordination and control of women" (Othman, 2008, p. 256). However, it is probably productive to understand Islamization more in a

ideology along with liberalism and secularism. The second section further illustrates the possibility of Islamic-themed films (sometimes loosely called “*film Islami*” or Islamic film) that deal with the issue of pluralism in Indonesian and Malaysian society. One of the popular genres after *Reformasi* is *film Islami* that carry symbols of Islam and have some pious Muslim characters who display an understanding of both Islamic teachings and practices. Finally, the last section focuses on the transgression of heteronormative sexuality in cinematic images following long periods of suppression under the authoritarian regime. Since *Reformasi* 1998, young filmmakers have started to tackle issues of sexuality and sexual identity as part of their political articulation to challenge patriarchal and morally conservative regimes.

The Unfinished Project of Religious and Racial Pluralism in Cinema

In the last ten years, “pluralism” has been a focal issue in contemporary Indonesia and Malaysia both in socio-political and creative fields. Several violent actions initiated by “conservative” (militant) groups against religious and sexual minorities in Indonesia (for example, the ban on the Ahmadiyah sect and persecution of its followers, church bombings, the enactment of the highly controversial Anti-Pornography Bill, and the sentencing of the chief editor of Indonesian *Playboy* magazine) point to growing intolerance that endangers plurality and differences as a perennial characteristic of Indonesian society. Similarly, in the Malaysian context, the demolition of several Hindu temples following government orders in 2006, the emergence of the extreme-right Malay organization “Perkasa” (*Pertubuhan Pribumi Perkasa Malaysia*) after the 2008 general

“performative” way in order to capture the construction of Muslim subjectivity as well as Islamicity that is sanctioned by both state and Islamist groups. In the Indonesian context, Heryanto (2014, p.26) defines Islamization as “a complex set of processes with multiple directions, involving wide range a wide variety of Muslim groups that do not necessarily agree with each other on many issues, none of whom has full control of the process.” He further complicates the definition of Islamization by referring to “non-religiously motivated agents and other factors (such as post-authoritarian politics, the expansion of global capitalism in consumer goods and services, and developments in new media technology) have partaken in broad process of Islamization” (2014, p.26).

election and recent controversies over the use of the word “Allah” in the Bible, indicate the continuation of various acts to disrupt the social harmony in Malaysia to the depth of discord and division. In short, religious and ethnic minority groups are threatened by the increasing pressures from the majority or militant groups that are becoming less tolerant to religious and racial differences. Therefore, in this section “pluralism” is not understood merely as a celebration of diversity or spectacle of differences in which ethnic/religious groups are able to co-exist peacefully in a multiracial and multireligious society. Rather, it should be understood as part and parcel of every citizen’s cultural rights to freely express (through any form of media including cinema) their own belief or cultural identity with the awareness that we are both “equal” and “distinctive” at the same time.

Issues of ethnic and religious pluralism in Indonesian cinema are generally associated with cinematic representations of the Chinese community and non-Muslims as minority groups in Indonesian society.³ The portrayal of Indonesian Chinese gradually changed after *Reformasi*. It started with Nia Dinata’s *Cau Bau Kan* (The Courtesan, 2002) that tells the saga of Giok Lan, an Indonesian living in Netherlands, who returns to Indonesia in search of her roots. She finds her mother (Tinung) living as a courtesan with the successful Chinese businessman (Tan Peng Liang) who was a secret supporter of the anti-colonial movement in Batavia during the Dutch Colonial period. Released coincidentally with the first public celebration of Chinese New Year since 1965, this film signaled an ethnically more tolerant Indonesian politics. Issues of pluralism and

³ During the New Order era Chinese was always depicted as “an outsider” in Indonesian society hence they need to be assimilated to become a fully Indonesian citizen. This typical representation can be seen in Deddy Armand’s *Mei Lan Aku Cinta Padamu* (Mei Lan, I Love You, 1974) and Maman Firmansjah’s *Putri Giok* (Beautiful Giok, 1980). In particular, *Putri Giok* tells the story of interracial romance between a Chinese woman (Han Giok Nio) and ‘pribumi’ (local) man (Herman). The relationship between Giok and Herman was blessed by Giok’s father (Han Liong Swie) as he realized the importance of assimilation and integration for Chinese in order to be good Indonesian citizen. While Chinese characters appear rarely in commercial cinema, once they do, they are crooks and buffoons.

multiculturalism have been a concern for film director Nia Dinata. In an interview, she remarks, "There are so many films that I want to make [...] But my current interest is the topic of diversity, because I think diversity is always challenging to society, both to the Indonesian society and the world as one large society" (Coppens, 2010, p.65). By portraying ethnic Chinese as nuanced and complex characters (nationalist hero/money-grabbing adventurer; good wife/whore), *Ca Bau-kan* challenged the stereotypical Chinese characters seen in New Order cinema. Not surprisingly, film scholar, Krishna Sen, writes, "In *Ca Bau-kan* we see the possibility of new kind of Indonesian cinema, capable of intersecting with the diverse and often contradictory moral and cultural universes which exist within the boundaries of the Indonesian nation, and thus with the potential to be a truly national-popular cinema" (2006, p.107). Although Heryanto views *Ca Bau-kan* as "a sincere, albeit awkward and only partially successful attempt to defy the decade-long stereotyping of Chinese Indonesian" (2008, p.80).

The portrayal of the Chinese Indonesian as an idealist student activist as well as a real historical figure during the last years of Sukarno era (1965-1968) can be seen later in Riri's Riza award winning film *Gie* (2005). This film won Best Film at the Indonesian Film Festival (FFI) 2005 and the Jury Prize at the Asia-Pacific Film Festival 2006 and received critical reviews in the media. Based on Soe Hok Gie's journal entitled *Catatan Seorang Demonstran* (Notes of a Demonstrator). This film not only portrays Soe Hok Gie (commonly called Gie) as a symbol of young Indonesians (represented as a "university student") struggling against an undemocratic regime, but it is also set against the darkest period of Indonesian modern history. Rather than merely narrating the Indonesian past, this film can be understood as a critical interrogation of official Indonesian history that has sidelined the significant role of Chinese Indonesian as well

as exposing the 1965 massacre of communist activists from a youth's perspective.⁴ As film director Riri Riza explains his reason of filming *Gie*: "Well, for the first time after many years, we had the opportunity to view or reflect history from a different point of view—the point of view of young people. Soe was a third generation Chinese Indonesian, who like his father was born in Jakarta, yet his story is missing from our textbooks and classrooms. Making this film was a chance for us to tell a story that has been forgotten or marginalized in our official history" (2012, p.112). Moreover, there is an intellectual affinity between the lives of Soe Hok Gie as a young activist with the filmmaker although they are ethnically different. Furthermore, Riri Riza remarks, "[E]verytime I make a film, I believe that my film should say something about contemporary society when it was made and presented [...] When I made *Gie*, it was because there was something about that particular character that told us about who we are today. So that is one aspect of history—when you read something when you see photographs, the one that you choose is always the one that you see yourself in" (2012, p.117). Likewise, the film's producer Mira Lesmana had been inspired by Soe Hok Gie's diary, particularly her understanding of the historical conditions of the 1960s. As she remarks, "I still remember, every time I opened a page I felt ashamed of myself. What Gie did was extraordinary. At the age of 14 he was already a keen reader of history and literature. This person whom I had never known has made me feel proud as an

⁴ While the representation of the massacre of communist activists in 1965 in cinema started in the New Order regime, the critical version of the atrocity began after the 1998 Reformasi. Garin Nugroho's *Puisi Tak Terkuburkan* (Unconcealed Poet, 1999) is probably the first film that attempted to revise the New Order's version of the events surrounding the 1965 killings. In the following years independent filmmaker and NGOs produced documentary films with the commitment of human rights issue such as *Mass Grave* (dir. Lexy Rambadeta, 2002), *Kado Untuk Ibu* (A Gift for Mother, dir. Syarikat Indonesia, 2004) and *Putih Abu-Abu: Masalah Perempuan* (Greyish White: Women's Past, 2006), *Seni Ditantang Jaman* (Arts Is Tested by the Time, 2008) and *Tjidurian 19* (2009). Other filmmakers chose fiction to portray the 1965 killings such as *Djejak Darah: Surat Untuk Adinda* (dir. Markus Aprisiyanto, Blood Trail: A Letter for the Beloved, 2007) and *Sinengker* (The Unrevealed, 2007), Hanung Bramantyo's *Lentera Merah* (Red Lantern, 2006), Ifa Isfanyah's *Sang Penari* (The Dancer, 2011). For more an insightful discussion of films on revised version of the 1965 killings, see Hartley (2010) and Heryanto (2012, 2014).

Indonesian. My intellectual horizon [*cakrawala berpikir*] has been opened [by Gie's diary]" (as cited in Kusno, 2012, p.131).

As a biopic genre, *Gie* narrates chronologically the lives of Soe Hok Gie from his boyhood at the secondary school to his years at the University of Indonesia (UI) in Jakarta. In this film since Soe was at the secondary school he critically challenges his teacher's wrong view cause him fails in the examination. Initially he feels very upset and wants to protest his teacher since his teacher has treated him unfairly and simply exercised his authority (power), but he is dissuaded after he discovers that his teacher's family live in poverty. Although Soe is living a modest way of life, he is always concerned with the poor (little) people. Many great books (written by Karl Marx, Mahatma Gandhi, Albert Camus) influenced his critical and political view as he had read those books veraciously. Despite being actively involved in a mountain climbing club and cine club, he regularly writes an articles articulating his social and political concerns. In the midst of political upheaval in the late 1960s, Soe's non-partisan stand puts him in an uneasy situation. Of course, he becomes an object of cynicism for many student organizations as they are either affiliated to political parties or operate as extensions of political parties' interest. At the same time, the oppositional political powers attempt to recruit Soe to further their political agenda. Soe deeply regrets supporting a new political regime, which he discovers is responsible for massacring millions of suspected communists, including his childhood friend (Han). Frustrated by the chaotic political conditions and rejected by a woman whom he loves so dearly, Soe decides to climb Semeru Mountain to contemplate his life but is tragically killed after inhaling the poisonous gas from the volcano.

However, while Soe Hok Gie clearly has identified himself as Chinese Indonesian, the ethnic Chinese agency in Indonesian politics is still problematic (Heryanto, 2008; Kusno, 2012). For Heryanto (2008), the portrayal of Soe Hok Gie's

zealous nationalism and anti-communist stance, highlighting the idea that in order to be “good Indonesians,” Chinese Indonesians need to constantly “prove” their ideological cleanliness and allegiance with Indonesian nation. In addition, given the absence of communication among Gie’s family members, Kusno criticizes the portrayal of Chinese family that “can never be part of Gie’s political consciousness or become the basis for constitution of the heroic story” (2012, p. 140). Indeed, it might be true that *Gie* still reflects to a certain extent the residual view of the New Order regime in which racial segregation leads to “ghettoization of citizen-Chinese” (Heryanto, 1998) that marginalized the Chinese from gaining positions in cabinet, as senior civil servants or in the military.⁵ Nevertheless, *Gie* essentially constructs the Chinese as a “new hero” figure (not only as young and radical) in contemporary Indonesian cinema in which there is no precedence in Indonesian cinema during the New Order that was dominated by military and Javanese ethnic figures. Hence, *Gie* not only opens up a new possibility for the Chinese to be accepted equally as Indonesian citizens, but also symbolically their significant position and important contribution in modern Indonesian history are clearly articulated in *Gie*. In other words, *Gie* underscores the politics of possibilities for Chinese Indonesians to be imagined fully as citizens; hence, it revives the repressed history of Chinese people in Indonesia.

Meanwhile, racial issues (particularly in regard to Chinese Malaysians) continue to characterize recent Malaysian films made under the shadow of the current aggressive government campaign of “1Malaysia” (One Malaysia). The 1Malaysia campaign employs different media (websites, Facebook, twitter, songs, videos, logo/brand) to propagate its message of Malaysian unity despite the racial and religious differences. Two main government programs (the Economic Transformation Program and the

⁵ For more detailed illustrations and critical discussion on the role of Ministry of Home Affairs in the New Order era in restricting the political participation of Chinese Indonesians, see Aizawa (2011).

Government Transformation Program) were launched to increase the nation's economic production and increase government efficiency and foster transparency. In 2011, there was two Chinese-language Malaysian films hit box-office: Namewee's directorial debut *Nasi Lemak 2.0* (2011) and James Lee's *Petaling Street Warriors* (2011). In particular, *Nasi Lemak 2.0* was quite phenomenal in Malaysia as it earned more than RM 8 million in the predominantly Malay audience.

Nasi Lemak 2.0 follows the journey of an arrogant and uncompromising chef Huang (played by the filmmaker himself) and a young woman (Xiao K) to learn how to make *nasi lemak* (coconut rice), claimed to be a national dish, from different ethnic groups across Malaysia. Through his journey he learns to overcome his sinocentrism and racism and to appreciate a multicultural Malaysian identity, cooking *nasi lemak* for the "best Chinese rice dish" competition. A graduate from Ming Chuan University in Taiwan, Namewee (his real name is Wee Meng Chee) caused a YouTube sensation in July 2007 through his controversial Malaysian national anthem parody *Negarakuku* which expresses his unhappiness at the preferences allotted to *bumiputeras* in various spheres of life in Malaysia and criticizes the principle of *Ketuanan Melayu* (Malay supremacy).

Meanwhile, *Petaling Street Warriors* was the first Malaysian *kungfu* (Chinese martial arts) film set in the famous China Town area in Kuala Lumpur, Petaling Street. *Petaling Street Warriors* revolves around Du Yao, an ordinary Hokkien *mee* (noodle) seller in Petaling Street in 1908 who finds out through various events that he is the descendant of the deposed Chinese emperor, Jian Wen, who was rumored to have fled to Southeast Asia in 1409. Du Yao and his wife Li Chun have to deal with various actors such as local gangs, a corrupt British officer and a eunuch from China who is looking for the lost treasure of Jian Wen. In the end of story Du Yao opts to be an immigrant who start life anew from the bottom rather than claim his royal lineage.

While cleverly appropriating popular Chinese (Hong Kong) film genre tropes (particularly Stephen Chow's *Kung Fu Hustle* and *God Cookery*), both *Nasi Lemak 2.0* and *Petaling Street Warriors* evoke various local and unique elements within Malaysian society. As Khoo (2014, p.2) argues both films "offer a richer understanding of local identity politics by providing perspectives about the role, contribution and attitudes of Chinese Malaysians towards ethnicity, the nation and Malaysian citizenship today." In *Nasi Lemak 2.0*, there are various characters (Malay, Indian, Chinese *peranakan*) representing the multiethnic Malaysian society and the appropriation of different musical and filmic styles. In an interview with Singapore media Namewee remarks the key success of his film: "I think this is the first film to combine different races and artists together in one film. I've never watched this kind of movie in Singapore before. Maybe many different races but they speak English, they never speak many multiple languages in one film. I think this is the first one" ("*Top-Grossing M'sian Film Nasi lemak 2.0*," 2011). While the cast are less diverse than *Nasi Lemak 2.0*, the ending of *Petaling Street Warriors* evokes egalitarianism and "in the spirit of democratic optimism: it's only when we give up inherited privileges that we can truly live (together)" (Muhammad as cited by Khoo, 2014, p.11). In short, the imaginary society that James Lee constructs in his film is "a nation built on sound principles of populist democracy" (Khoo, 2014, p.11) that fosters equality and self-actualization of its citizens. In an interview James Lee boldly articulates his vision of his country: "The only way to get a clear picture of Malaysia is for all our races to contribute. This country doesn't need East vs. West, Islam vs. Non-Islam, we need 10 perspectives on everything" (Krich, 2003). Here James Lee highlights the importance of respecting and recognizing different perspectives regardless of racial and religious backgrounds in Malaysia in order to be a truly plural society as can be seen in his film.

It is noteworthy that since *Reformasi*, there is an open political climate for Chinese Indonesians to express their identity after 32 years under the repression of anything related to the Chinese cultures and artifacts by the New Order regime (Hoon, 2008). Hence, *Reformasi* in 1998 is also perceived as a “renaissance” of Chinese Indonesians marked by the recognition and celebration of the multitude of social and cultural expressions of Chineseness. Comparing Indonesia and Malaysia in regard with racial policies after *Reformasi*, a Malaysian social activist Yin Ee Kong (2008, p.301) writes, “Even as Indonesia discards its racial policies and moves forward, in Malaysia we continue our racial policies with the emphasis on “Ketuanan Melayu” [Malay supremacy].” Of course, Yin refers to the new era of political liberalization of Chinese Indonesians since *Reformasi*, while referring to the persistence of Malay supremacy despite the government rhetoric to treat Malaysian citizens equally. However, in the Malaysian context, ethnic Chinese have been expressing their culture and identity freely in various fields although quite rare in cinematic forms prior to the *Reformasi* as the local film market is dominated by Malay films (at least films in Malay language or *Bahasa Malaysia*) and local Chinese audiences mostly consume foreign Chinese films from Hong Kong, Taiwan or Mainland China. Only after *Reformasi*, are Chinese films such as *Homecoming* (dir. Wong Kew-Lit, 2002), *Tiger Woohoo* (dir. Chiu Keng Guan, 2010), *Ice Kacang Puppy Love* (dir. Ah-Niu or Tan Kheng Siong, 2010), *Great Day* (dir. Chiu Keng Guan, 2011), *Ah Beng: Three Wishes* (dir. Silver Chung, 2012) and *The Journey* (dir. Chiu Keng Guan, 2014), which are usually released during the Chinese New Year, hit local box office and even outnumber Malay films. For instance, *Tiger Wohoo* earned nearly RM 4 million in Malaysia alone, *Ice Kacang Puppy Love* earned over RM 3.5 million in Malaysia (netted RM 800.000 from overseas), *Great Day* earned around RM 4.5 million. The commercial success of local Chinese language films in Malaysia not only broaden their film diet from foreign Chinese films to local Chinese language films, but also shows

the ability to penetrate the Malaysian film market that had long been dominated by Malay language films.

Despite their commercial success, young Malaysian filmmakers have defied the myth of a fragmented Malaysian film audience defined along the racial lines and constructed alternative images and narratives of Malaysian Chinese as an organic part of Malaysian society. Unlike the members of new generation of indie filmmakers (James Lee, Tan Chui Mui, Ho Yuhang, Woo Ming Jin, Lew Seng Tat), those Chinese Malaysian filmmakers come from media or creative industry in Malaysia and then step in in the filmmaking to make films which cater primarily to local as well as overseas Chinese audience as their films are in Mandarin. Although those films look less overt politically as they portray the mundane realities of Chinese community in Malaysia, they individually and collectively produce meaningful stories of untold problems of the Chinese community and capture a utopian view of Malaysian plural society in which every ethnic group is able to articulate their feelings, fears and hopes without any repression from the dominant groups. For instance, *Tiger Wohoo* follows a troop of novice performers training to perform the traditional dragon dance, while as period youth romantic drama *Ice Kacang Puppy* deals with the first love of young protagonist set in Ipoh and Penang with nostalgic outlook.

Meanwhile, in both Indonesian and Malaysian contexts, racial differences become more complicated when they intersect with religious identity. This is because race and religion are intimately intertwined, race can be exploited to provoke religious conflict and vice versa. More specifically, the notion of “Chineseness” is attributed to “non-Muslims,” whereas the notion of “Malay” or “*bumiputera*” (sons of the soil) in Malaysia is unambiguously associated with being “Muslim.” Similarly, the notion “*pribumi*” (native) in Indonesia is usually analogous to being “Muslim.” Furthermore, in the context of Malaysia, race is constitutionally defined by religion with regard to the

Malays. Probably the best site to look symbolically at the problematic relationship between Chinese (non-Muslim) and Malay or “*pribumi*” (Muslim) is in the romantic (melodrama) genre as it allows the audience to look intimately and affectionately at a personal relationship between two main characters with different racial and religious backgrounds.

Cinematic representations of non-Muslims (particularly Christians/Catholics) in Indonesia can be found in romantic (melodrama) genre in which male protagonist in the film is Muslim while the female protagonist is Christian. For instance, Benni Setiawan’s *3 Hati, Dua Dunia, Satu Cinta* (3 Hearts, Two Worlds, One Love, 2010) describes the romantic relationship of Rosid (Muslim) and Delia (Catholic) in which both their parents disapprove their relationship due to the uncompromising religious differences. While Delia’s parents attempt to send Delia to study in the US, Rosid’s parents seek to introduce a pious Muslim girl (Nabila) into Rosid’s life. In the end, Rosid and Delia decide to end their relationship, as they are not able to compromise their religious beliefs in order to respect other’s belief. According to the film’s producer, Putut Widjanarko, the story was based on two popular Ben Sohik novels that narrate the issue of religious differences in a light way by choosing romantic comedy genre (personal interview, 24 November 2011). However, an Islamist group accused the film of propagating the ideology of “pluralism” (which has been banned by the fatwa of the Indonesian Muslim Clerics Council/MUI) disguised as a pop culture product. Conversely, for a liberal group this film has not really engaged with the issue of religious pluralism in Indonesia (personal interview with Putut Widjanarko, 24 November 2011). These two different reactions toward *3 Hati, Dua Dunia, Satu Cinta* seems inseparable from the image of Mizan as a production company.⁶ Started as Islamic book publisher and now expanded

⁶ Mizan Productions achieved its popularity when they produced (with Miles Film) the mega box-office film *Laskar Pelangi* (Rainbow Troops, 2009). Since then, Mizan has produced many films such as Ifa Ifansyah’s *Garuda di Dadaku* (Garuda on My Chest, 2009), Aditya Gumay’s *Emak*

to be “content provider” for television, film and new media, Mizan was born in the mid of 1980s to promote “cultural Islam” which chooses to promote an inclusive and moderate Islam as Mizan believes Islam is inseparable from the Indonesian unique culture and history. Although Mizan is a new production company in the Indonesian film industry, they are quite selective in producing films with clear vision in promoting more inclusive and moderate Islam in Indonesia.

Although *3 Hati, Dua Dunia, Satu Cinta* tackles the problematic relationship between a Muslim and a Catholic, it still dwells on the encounter within the *pribumi* community. Some films attempt to portray more complex relationships between two characters with different racial and religious backgrounds. Inspired by mostly current religious bigotry and violence in Indonesia and his personal experiences, film director Hanung Bramantyo in cooperation with Mahaka Film Productions (owned by Muslim businessman Erick Tohir) made *Tanda Tanya* (Question Mark, original title “*Masih Pentingkah Kita Berbeda?*” or literally *Does It Matter That We Are Different?*, 2011). According to Bramantyo, this film is inspired by real incidents in Indonesia such as the stabbing of a Catholic priest in Bekasi (West Java) in September 2010, the devastating violent acts against Ahmadi in Cikeusik (West Java) in February 2011 followed by the banning of Ahmadiyah and the dispute of the development of Yasmin church in Bogor (West Java) in March 2011 and even his real experience of coming from a religiously and ethnically plural family background (interview, 24 December 2011). Bramantyo’s main concern is the crisis of pluralism in contemporary Indonesia, particularly the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims as well as between *pribumi* (literally

Ingin Naik Haji (lit. Mom Wants to Go for Pilgrimage, 2009) Riri Riza’s *Sang Pemimpi* (The Dreamers, 2009). Unlike most Islamic conservative group, Mizan do not advocate Islamizing the institutional aspects of their film productions, working with Christian film producer Shanty Harmayn in the production of *Garuda di Dadaku*.

“native” or local people) and Chinese⁷. Of course, this is a paradoxical situation since *Reformasi* (democratization) is supposed to be a fertile ground for pluralism to grow and thrive. While this film was nominated for 9 categories at the Indonesian Film Festival (FFI) in 2010, it only received one award for Best Cinematography (Yadi Sugandi). In addition, costing around IDR 2 billion, it only attracted quite modest audience in the cinema (500,000). However, *Tanda Tanya* received critical and favorable reviews from the several media as “a gallant attempt to promote moderate Islam and reveal the sensitive issue” (Setiawati, 2011) and “its social commentary much needed considering Indonesia’s religious turmoil” (Sartono, 2011).

The plot of *Tanda Tanya* revolves around the interactions of three families: Kat Tan Sun’s family of Buddhist background, Sholeh and Menuk’s family with Muslim background, and Rika’s family with Catholic background. Kat Tan Sun and his son Ping Hen or Hendra have a Chinese food restaurant that serves *non-halal* food, but Menuk (a pious Muslim) works in this restaurant since her husband (Sholeh) is unemployed. Meanwhile, following her divorce, Rika looks after her son (Abi) and converts from Islam to Catholicism though she still teaches her son some Islamic rituals. She gradually develops a relationship with an unsuccessful Muslim actor (Surya) who hesitantly accepts her offer to perform the role of Jesus Christ in the Christmas and Easter pageants and to be Santa Claus to entertain a child with cancer. As an owner of the Chinese restaurant, Kat Tan Sun as well as his wife Lim Giok Lie respect his Muslim employees as he always reminds them to perform prayer (*sholat*) on time and closes his restaurant during the celebration of Islamic holiday (*Hari Raya*). He also marks and separates the

⁷ During the New Order era, there were two official categorization of Indonesian citizens: *pribumi* (native) and “*non-pribumi*” (non-native or commonly understood as ethnic Chinese). Of course, the terms “*pribumi*” and “*non-pribumi*” are artificial construct since more than 300 ethnic groups in Indonesia can be considered as “*pribumi*” (native); hence there is no single *pribumi* identity. While the New Order regime simply ignored the heterogeneity within the *pribumi*, they constructed the Chinese as “foreigner” or “new comer” (*pendatang*) even though they had acquired Indonesian citizenship or were born in Indonesia.

utensils for cooking *halal* and *non-halal* food and even covers the restaurant windows during the fasting month (*Ramadhan*) to respect Muslims who are practicing their religious obligation. In contrast, his son (Ping Hen) is a bit harsh to his father's employees because Menuk has left him to marry Sholeh and the racist abuse he receives from his Muslim neighbors. When Kat Tan Sun falls sick, Ping Hen takes control of the restaurant and changes all his father's rules. For instance, he does not cover the windows during the Muslim fasting month and urges his Muslim employees to work during Islamic holiday. As a result, a mob attacks and vandalizes the restaurant because the owner of the restaurant does not respect Muslims. Of course, this incident shocks Kat Tan Sun leading to his death. Meanwhile, Sholeh finally gets a job as a member of Banser NU, a youth wing of Indonesia's largest Muslim organization, Nahdlatul Ulama, and his first task is to protect the security of a church on Christmas Eve. Accidentally, Sholeh discovers a homemade bomb under a seat in the church hall and he attempts to relocate it by himself, but unfortunately it explodes before he is able to reach the churchyard. After undergoing significant hardship and the death of several family members due to religious violence, all characters are able to reconcile and live in harmony. For instance, by converting to Islam, Ping Hen changes his restaurant to a Chinese Muslim restaurant serving only *halal* foods and a new market is named after Sholeh to commemorate his sincere sacrifice to save Christians.



Figure 3.1. Still from Hanung Bramantyo's *Tanda Tanya*

A Muslim woman (Menuk) is working at the Chinese restaurant (owned and run by Kat Tan Sun) that serves pork (non-halal food).

The narrative of *Tanda Tanya* may seem didactic as well as excessively dramatic since it has some flaws in developing the motifs and characters such as the incident of priest stabbing, the church bombing, and the conversion of Rika and Ping Hen to Islam. Nevertheless, this film conveys a strong message of religious tolerance and recognition of minority groups which are rarely portrayed in Indonesian commercial (mainstream) films. As film director, Hanung Bramantyo is aware that his film would be not commercial, given his “statement” regarding current issue of religious pluralism.⁸ To make his film less provocative or too offensive to Islamist groups, he actually changed the title into a “?” in order to open up multiple interpretations among the audience. However, the happy ending of film perhaps can be interpreted as an imaginary harmonious plural society without sanitizing from the agonizing differences within Indonesian society. Since in the end of story Rika finally is able to obtain her parents’

⁸ Hanung Bramantyo classifies his films into three different categories: (1) film as diary (*buku harian*); (2) film as (political) statement; and (3) film as money machine (*mesin uang*). For him, *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban* falls under the second category, while *Tanda Tanya* can be classified into first and second category. Interestingly, although *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* was lauded as a successful “Islamic” or “Dakwah” film, it simply falls under the last category although initially he intended it to be political statement as he had to compromise with various stakeholders’ interests in the production (personal interview with Hanung Bramantyo, 24 December 2011).

blessing for conversion, this film also promotes religious freedom that has been condemned by most Indonesian Muslim clerics.

Meanwhile, the intersection between race and religion is rarely represented in Malaysian cinema. This is because the issue of race and religion is deemed “sensitive” in Malaysian society. The keen and devoted promoter of multiculturalism in Malaysian cinema is commonly attributed to the late Yasmin Ahmad.⁹ She started her career making several multicultural-themed TV ads for Petronas (Malaysian National Oil Company) which are an annual feature on Malaysian television. Yasmin made her directorial debut with the telemovie *Rabun* (My Failing Eyes, 2003) inspired by the free spirit and liberal view of her parents on Malaysian multicultural society. Her subsequent films such as *Sepet* (Slit-eyes/ Chinese Eyes, 2005), *Gubra* (Anxiety, 2006), *Talentine* (2009) and *Muallaf* (Convert, 2009) speak clearly about the persistent issue of interracial and interreligious relations in contemporary Malaysia, which are constantly under the threat of ultra-religious and conservative groups. Although Yasmin’s films were not intended to induce controversies for the sake of commercial interest, the issue of interracial relationships inevitably provoked furious reactions from conservative and religious group since multicultural issues are rarely represented by commercial (mainstream) cinema in a bold and honest way. Moreover, the controversy surrounding Yasmin Ahmad’s film, as a film scholar puts it, “reflect underlying political and social discord in Malaysia” (Sim, 2009, p.49).

⁹ Indeed, *Sepet* is not the first Malaysian film that has an interracial romance story as some classic P. Ramlee’s films such as *Sesudah Subuh* (After Dawn, 1967) and *Gerimis* (Drizzle, 1968) tell the romance between Malay man and Chinese woman and a Malay man and an Indian woman respectively. In the 1980s, Othman Hafsham’s *Mekanik* (Mechanic, 1983) usually dubbed as “truly Malaysian” as it showed various characters speak in their own languages such Chinese Malaysians speaking a mixture of English and Chinese and English and Tamil Malaysians speaking Tamil (Khoo, 2006). Like P. Ramlee’s films, Rahim Razali’s *Tsu Feh Sofiah* (1986) tended to have an assimilationist approach as it narrates a romantic relationship between a Malay man and a Chinese woman who converts to Muslim and speak Malay even to her own Chinese father.

Yasmin's films can be characterized, using Gerald Sim's aptly words (2009, p.48), as "politically progressive, intellectually suggestive, but at the same time unabashedly sentimental." In particular, both *Sepet* and *Gubra* dwell on the interracial romance as popular subgenre in post-independence cinema in which it provides "a convenient narrative structure on which to balance history, tradition, modernity, identity, culture, ethnicity and gender" (Sim, 2009, p.53). Her first commercial film *Sepet* narrates the interracial romance between a Malay girl (Orked) and a Chinese boy (Jason) in which they have different social class backgrounds. While Orked represents a Malay middle class family, Jason who is a pirate VCD seller comes from a Chinese working class family. The problem emerges since Jason cannot detach himself from the sister of a famous Chinese gangster. Although *Sepet* is obviously about the interracial romance, Yasmin Ahmad actually intended to make a simple "first love" story as a pure and innocent experience rather than deliberately dealing with racial issue in Malaysia (Murat, 2006, p.153-154). Not surprisingly, like Yasmin's film director model (Charlie Chaplin, Yasujiro Ozu and Hou Hsiao-hsien), she tends to "allow human emotion and everyday gesture to unfold in their own time" (Sim, 2009, p.48). However, Yasmin's intention of filmmaking can be politically deceptive as she cleverly intersects human emotion and Malaysian socio-cultural milieu in order to suggestively evoke the awareness of audience toward the spaces occupied by the characters since she prefers to use a long shot¹⁰ in *Sepet* that capture and inform the surrounding milieu of the characters. Moreover, through compelling story telling Yasmin provides the audience a "sense of melding imagination through dialogue in a continuous (self)" and "a

¹⁰ "Long shot" (sometimes called as a "full shot" and a "wide shot") is generally used to set the scene or to show the entire object or human figure and is intended to place it in some relation to its surrounding. Technically, a long shot requires a wide-angle lens in which camera is positioned at the great distance from the objects that roughly correspond to an audience's view of the stage within proscenium arch in live theater. Regarding the human figure, a standing person would be fully visible in the frame in a long shot.

willingness to engage with others in an open and frank way” (Richards & Zawawi, 2012, p.446).



Figure 3.2. Still from Yasmin Ahmad's *Sepet*
Orked (wearing Malay outfit *baju kurung*) expresses her affection to her Chinese boyfriend Jason.

Meanwhile, as sequel of *Sepet*, *Gubra* dwells on the life of Orked after she completes her study overseas and has married Arif. Accidentally, when Orked's father (Pak Atan) is hospitalized due to a diabetic attack, she meets the brother of late Jason (Alan) and eventually she started to develop a relationship with him. As Orked's relationship with her husband becomes sour after she discovers he has had an affair with another woman, she feels more drawn to Alan. There is also parallel story about the relationship between a pious Muslim couple (Bilal Li and Kak Maz) and their two sex worker neighbors (Temah and Kiah). Meanwhile, Temah is diagnosed with a fatal illness and her son's father Ki comes back to steal her money. These two unrelated stories may seem confusing and incoherent for the audience, but Yasmin Ahmad has a particular reason. As she remarks, "I am only interested in putting two stories side by side, the story about the middle class family that have a fragile emotion and working class family that face various obstacles in their life yet they still keep calm and receptive to other

people”¹¹ (Murat, 2006, p.154). While the stark contrast of emotional resilience may be a common narrative device for dramatization, it subtly inserts issues of class as well as ideology within Malay community and imagines the possible life of two different families experiencing various social, cultural and religious constraints. Furthermore, Daniels (2013, p.117-18) characterizes Yasmin’s films “transcode discourses of ethnic and religious pluralism, bottom-up multiculturalism and liberal Islam that contest Malay supremacy, Islamic separatism, and conservative ideologies.”

However, the way Yasmin Ahmad portrayed interracial/interreligious relations in her films perhaps is unavoidably “too sentimental” (interview with U-Wei Haji Shaari, 18 January 2012) and “too sweet” (interview with Dain Said, 22 January 2012) which may contain a lot of emotional excesses and easily sanitizes the bitter reality of the racial tensions in Malaysian society. In addition, Yasmin’s films like *Sepet* and *Gubra* reached mostly middle-class audience in Malaysia as they have some dialogue in English. Not surprisingly, the most popular of Yasmin’s film in Malaysia was *Mukhsin* (2007) since it is set in the Malay *kampong* and most dialogue is in Malay language (personal interview with Amir Muhammad, 7 January 2012). The sentimentality of Yasmin’s films is easily misunderstood to trivialize issues of race and religion in Malaysia as it emphasizes human relationship and individual psychology at the expense of social and political context.

Analyzing Yasmin Ahmad’s trilogy of films (*Sepet*, *Gubra* and *Mukhsin*), Benjamin McKay concludes, “For all Yasmin Ahmad’s liberal sentiments on inclusion and her celebration of diversity and hybridity, the films are ultimately framed by schizophrenic demands of two seemingly irreconcilable strands in the contemporary Malaysian discourse on identity. The ambiguous ending of *Sepet* and the dreamed sequences of the

¹¹ “Saya hanya tertarik untuk meletakkan kedua-duanya sebelah-menyebelah, cerita tentang keluarga kelas menengah atas yang emosinya begitu rapuh dan keluarga kelas pekerja yang menghadapi lebih banyak cabaran berat yang terpaksa ditempuh setiap hari, tetapi lebih tenang dan senang menerima orang lain dengan seadanya.”

two later films [*Gubra* and *Mukhsin*] hint at possibilities that are, to date, still seemingly only attainable through *dream*" (emphasis added, 2012, p.119). In addition, columnist Jacqueline Ann Surin, writing in *The Sun*, highlights the new possibilities to look at Malaysia: "In my opinion, Yasmin's two films [*Sepet* and *Gubra*] are not brilliant but they are brave and important because they offer us *possibilities* [emphasis added] other than retribution, intolerance, sexism, fascism and racism" (as cited in Wei Ang, 2007, p.29). This is precisely the political resonance of Yasmin Ahmad's films since they offer almost an inversion of the existing issues of race and religion in Malaysia and invite the audience to dream an imaginary Malaysia that transcends rigid race based politics or using Gabriel's (2011) term "trans-racial cultural imaginary." Reflecting the legacy of Yasmin Ahmad's film, Malaysian scholar Zaharom Nain aptly writes, "Excessive sentimentality or not, left with choice between the love, optimism and humanity of Yasmin's films, and her lasting legacy, and the loathing, the pessimism and barbarism others, I would like to think that the majority of Malaysians would choose her vision" (2012, p.451).

While Yasmin's films (*Sepet* and *Gubra*) fantasize new possibilities of interracial and interreligious relationship amidst the dominant racialized politics and religious conservatism, Bramantyo's film (*Tanda Tanya*) dispels the continuation of politics of racialism through imagining the ideal of a plural society in contemporary Indonesia. Bramantyo's film can be interpreted as a critical intervention into the crisis of religious and racial pluralism in contemporary Indonesian society marked by the rise of religious bigotry and violence. Under the New Order authoritarian and repressive regime, any political movement or social tensions were tamed as well as tightly controlled using the military, while racial differences were repressed through the government's assimilationist policy. The political liberalization brought about by *Reformasi* not only opened up democratic spaces for different racial and religious groups to strive, but

paradoxically also given a chance for conservative and extreme-right groups to emerge. Meanwhile, the challenge of Malaysian plural society, according to Gabriel (2011, p.369), “is not simply that Malaysians must learn together by ‘tolerating’ cultural differences, but they must accept that we are all translated beings.” Hence, both Yasmin Ahmad’s and Hanung Barmantyo’s films are forms of political statement and engagement with current problems within Malaysian and Indonesian plural society rather than simply filmmakers’ artistic expression.

It would be interesting to look at other Indonesian and Malaysian indie films that tackle the same theme of religious and racial pluralism as they are produced with a small budget and supported by non-professional actors but with total creative control in the hands of the filmmaker. As a result, independent films have more rooms for improvisation and experimentation in dealing the theme of religious and racial pluralism. Unlike mainstream (commercial) cinema and its perspective on interreligious and interracial themes, Samaria Simanjuntak’s indie film *Cin(T)a* (Love, 2010) tells the love story between two characters, Cina (who is Chinese Christian), a spirited 18-year-old college freshman, and Anissa (a Muslim), a 29-year-old senior whose fame and beauty have left her lonely. This film is not only narrating the uneasy romantic relationship between a Muslim and a non-Muslim, but also boldly capturing the feeling of being Chinese and *pribumi* (local/indigenous) in contemporary Indonesia. Furthermore, this film questions religious pluralism in general as can be read in the blurb of the DVD version: “Why do You [God] create us differently if You only want to be worshiped in one way?” Through parallel editing, one scene in this film shows different Muslim and Christian rituals to highlight an exoteric element of the two religions to show how the potentiality of building peaceful human relationships between people of different faiths. The ending of *Cin(T)a* may suggest an impossibility of interracial/interreligious relationship or an unbridgeable chasm between Javanese Islam

and Chinese Christian in Indonesia since Cina pursues further study in Singapore after receiving a scholarship while Anissa gets married to a rich Javanese man. However, this film has unabashedly opened up a critical dialog about the hidden problems in the relationship between Javanese Muslim and Chinese Christian which is avoided in daily conversation or public discourse. Therefore, this film provides an imaginary and peaceful world in which (Javanese) Muslim and (Chinese) Christian are able to talk intimately and even fall in love despite their differences which contrast the many violent conflicts across Indonesia after *Reformasi*. Arguing for the power of hybridity as a necessity position of Chinese Indonesians, Ien Ang (2001, p.73) writes, "It has to do with securing the very possibility for Chinese Indonesians to continue to live in Indonesia in a situation of unchosen co-existence and entanglement with (other) Indonesians. Indeed, it is only through hybridization that Chinese Indonesians can stake a claim on the validity and, yes, 'authenticity' of their Indonesianess."

Another independent film entitled *CINtA* (2010) directed by Steven Facius Winata not only has the same title with Samaria Simanjuntak's film, but also deals with the same issue of interracial relationship. The title plays on the Indonesian words "*cinta*" (meaning "love") and "*cina*" (a derogatory term commonly used to refer to ethnic Chinese). Unlike *Cin(T)a*, the main characters (A Su and Siti) live in the present-day Glodok area in North Jakarta's Chinatown district and hence the setting is thickly colored with the Chinese atmosphere. A Su lives with his father who is a pork-noodle stall owner, while Siti is a daughter of a *Haji* and wears a hijab. Having secretly learnt Islam, A Su proposes marriage to Siti. Of course, A Su's father is upset as he harbours traumatic memories of *pribumi* (local people) who raped and killed his daughter (Ah Ling) during the May 1998 riots. Similarly, Siti's father rejects A Su's conversion to Muslim since he doubts A Su's motives are genuine. Through voice over, the viewers listen to the reflection of A Su's problematic identity: "Being Chinese is really easy,

especially when you want to look indifferent. Like having fence tightly locked, and you start to forget that life has opened itself so long.” Furthermore, the audience hears his deep pessimistic voice: “Being Chinese could also be hard, and could be really hard if we want...” (then the audience watches the scene when A Su meets Siti and says, “I want to marry you”). In an interview with a scholar Charlotte Setijadi, film director Steven Facius Winata explained the reason of the inevitability of A Su and Siti’s love:

The idea of making a film actually came after watching *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* [The Love Verses, 2008] where I thought to myself that in real life, converting your religion for love is not that easy, especially in the current climate. There are so many other factors you have to consider, like family, friends, society, etc. [...] That is what I wanted to portray in *CINTA*, that although ethnic difference is a problem, difference in faith is more difficult to negotiate (Setijadi, 2013, p.78).

Despite drawing inspiration from an Islamic movie for his own film, Steven Facius Winata, who is ethnic Chinese and graduated from the Jakarta Art Institute (IKJ) majoring film directing, underscores the problems in the negotiation between race and religion, particularly in the case of interracial marriage as depicted in the romantic relationship between A Su and Siti in *CINTA*. Studying Chinese identity in post-Suharto Indonesia, Chang-Yau Hoon argues, “Difference in religion is arguably one of the biggest obstacles for interracial marriage between non-Muslim Chinese and Muslim *pribumi*” (2008, p.170). In particular, looking at “the current climate” (using Winata’s phrase) there is strong tendency to avoid interreligious marriage within Muslim community since the Indonesian Muslim Clerics (MUI) in 2005 issued a fatwa against inter-religious marriage along with other controversial fatwas against “pluralism, secularism and religious liberalism” despite varying degrees of criticism from both Muslims and non-Muslims. Meanwhile, according to Hoon’s study (2008, p.170), one of the obstacles for interracial romance (marriage) for some of his Chinese informants is the distrust toward Muslims due to their involvement in some of anti-Chinese riots in the past and many terrorist incidents.

Not surprisingly, the objection of Asu's father in *CINTA* is based not racial or religious differences, but rather on the traumatic memory of the rape of his daughter in the May 1998 riots. Although this is only briefly mentioned in the conversation between Asu and his father and not supported with footage¹² of that incident, the film serves as a reminder of the unresolved racial riot in the recent past and the problem of impunity of the human rights violations against ethnic minorities in Indonesia. As Heryanto (1999) has noted, "the May 1998 rape opened up a new chapter in the history of Indonesia's political violence" (p. 299). Unfortunately, the most disturbing fact about this racialized political violence is "the paucity of hope for any meaningful restitution, or legal recourse for the victims" (Heryanto, 1999, p.301). Unlike many observers, Heryanto (1999) argues that mass violence in May 1998 was state-sponsored racialized terror rather than a series of racist massive riots. Furthermore, he explains:

Anyone familiar with Indonesia is fully aware that no social group outside the state can possibly have even half of the capacity to conduct the violence of the magnitude and effectiveness as taking place in Jakarta and Surakarta [Central Java] [...] No racial or ethnic groups in Indonesia, no matter how agitated, could possibly inflict a systematic violence in which 1,198 lives (of which 27 dies from gunfire) were lost, 150 females were raped, 40 shopping malls and 4,000 shops were burned down and thousands of vehicles and of houses were set afire simultaneously in 27 areas in a capital city of 10 million inhabitants in less than 50 hours. All was done without the culprit having to confront the state security forces or face indictment! (Heryanto, [1999] 2014, p.136)

Previously, two independent shorts films, Ifa Isfansyah's *Huang Chen Guang* (2008) and Edwin's *Trip to the Wound* (2008) narrate the aftermath of mass violence in May 1998 focusing on the rape victim. However, according to Setijadi (2013, p.70), "the film's narrative foci are not on the characters' ethnic identities" but are centered around the theme of friendship, fleeting human encounters, and the need for human beings to have

¹² Generally, the term "footage" is used to refer to the amount of film shot over particular period and related to the traditional way of measuring this in feet (as can be seen in a counter in the camera). A foot of 35mm film contains 16 frames and film is shot at 24 frames per second. In this context, footages refer to visual evidence usually used in the documentary film, which can be obtained from the television or national archive, to support the idea of filmmaker.

closure after traumatic events. Both Isfansyah's and Edwin's films are part of an omnibus entitled *9808* under *Proyek Payung*¹³ (see the context of this project in Chapter 2). Since the aim of this project is to commemorate a decade of *Reformasi* movement in Indonesia (1998-2008) and initiate a public discussion through film screening, both short films focus less on particular issues of being ethnically Chinese but rather on "universal" issues of memory of pain or emotional recollection of the victims of mass violence in May 1998 and the way the victims escape from the monstrous memory and carry on with their lives.¹⁴ The *Proyek Payung* initiative has successfully attracted diverse indie filmmakers for a good cause and provoked public discussions (as the film was widely reviewed on Indonesian mass media) of mass violence in May 1998, that tended to be neglected by the state after 10 years of *Reformasi* as there is no follow up of the independent investigation of KOMNAS HAM (The National Commission on Human Rights) in 2008 of the racially-motivated brutal rape and lack of strong political will to resolve the impunity of the perpetrators.

It should be noted that there are some similarities between *Cin(T)a* and *CINtA* in terms of the name of Chinese character and the end of story. In *Cin(T)a* the Chinese character's name is "Cina" (the derogatory name for Indonesian Chinese), while the Chinese character's name in *CINtA* is "A Su" (derogatory low Javanese word meaning "dog").¹⁵ In addition, the end of story of both films suggests the impossibility of a relationship between ethnic Chinese and local people (Javanese and Betawi), particularly

¹³ See the context of this project in Chapter Two.

¹⁴ Other two short films, Ariani Darmawan's *Sugiharti Halim* and Lucky Kuswandi's *A Letter of Unprotected Memories* deal with the Chinese Indonesian community. The first short is a parody story of the impact of the presidential decree (Keppres No. 127/ Kep/ 12/ 1966) on the obligation for ethnic Chinese to adopt "Indonesian" names as part of the New Order's assimilationist policy. Meanwhile, the second short tells the story of celebration of Chinese New Year (in Indonesia commonly called as "Imlek") as the new government lifted the ban after more than 33 years.

¹⁵ Since the *Reformasi* the distinction between "*totok*" (China-born, pure blood) and "*peranakan*" (local-born, mixed blood) no longer represent the identity of ethnic Chinese in Indonesia. Instead, the new term "Chinese Indonesian" or "Indonesian Tionghoa" is widely used and becomes an inclusive term to refer to the people of Chinese decent in Indonesia.

in terms of marriage. Interestingly, though Siti finally gets married with a Muslim man in order to please her parents, she still has an optimistic view regarding the interreligious relationship as the audience can hear from her voice over, “The most important thing [in our life] is the decision to do something at least once. If you strong enough to take that chance... The courage to choose is never wrong (inserted image of mosque)... This story will never end.” Siti seems has a more inclusive view of other ethnicities, and she is not “colorblind” to other ethnicities. This clearly can be seen in the scene when Asu asks desperately about his real identity after Siti’s father rejected his conversion and Siti answers calmly that he is simply A Su (neither Chinese nor Muslim) as she used to know. To put it simply, for Siti both ethnic and religious identity are subordinated to the equality amongst human being.

Unlike Yasmin Ahmad’s trilogy films, Brenda Danker’s and Nam Ron’s indie film *Gadoh* (Quarrel, 2009) boldly tackles an issue of interracial relations as it is intended to explore the perception of identity and to challenge the hatred of the “other.” Explaining the reason behind the making of *Gadoh*, co-director Namron, points out:

I want peace and harmony on the inside. I am speaking from a social perspective, the acceptance of society without prejudice and so on. I don’t want systems or boundaries of class, race and status. We are still prejudiced now, especially when it comes to race. This is why I made the film *Gadoh*. Sometimes the Malays in their own groups will release their rage without feeling remorse (Shah, 2010 p.121).

Meanwhile, the other co-director, Brenda Danker, recalls her university days where there is no real avenue within the social and education system to discuss openly the cultural and religious differences in Malaysian plural society (“*Gadoh*,” n.d.). *Gadoh* is part of a KOMAS film series entitled *Aku Bangsa Malaysia* (I am Malaysian), a collection of short films (videos) intended as resource tools for education and discussion on various topics of racism in Malaysia. Although first introduced more than 20 years ago by Mahathir in same speech in which he outlined his vision for Malaysia leading up to the year 2020 (known as “Vision 2020”), the concept of ‘Bangsa Malaysia’ has been

officially defined and outlined by the state (Leong, 2014, p.125). Thus, the initiative of KOMAS to inculcate the idea of Bangsa Malaysia through an audiovisual medium (along with their national campaign of “*Anak Bangsa Malaysia*” (Child of Malaysian Nation) and carrying slogan “truth, justice, respect and dignity for all *Anak Bangsa Malaysia*” can be understood as an attempt to create a political possibility of a more inclusive, trans-ethnic identity that commensurate with the Malaysia’s heterogeneous social experiences and realities.

Premiering at the HELP University College theater on 22 May 2009, *Gaduh* narrates the racial conflict between a Malay student group led by Khalil and a Chinese student group led by Heng although they are from the same school. While the two groups always exchange racist aspersion (curse) one to another seems to lead a violent and open conflict outside school. Raj (as the representative Indian character) is sandwiched in the middle of the conflict. As this racial conflict enlarges to become the school’s concern, the principal (Mr Chua) moves to take a firm action to resolve the problem during the teachers meeting. Rejecting an “outdated” idea to separate ethnically two different student groups to prevent any conflict and counsel them, one teacher (Ms Ann) comes up with unusual idea to ask the two student groups to join a drama (theatre) production. Mr Chua instantly agrees with Ms Ann’s idea, although most teachers disagree with that idea. Eventually she asks her former best friend Azman (played by co-director Namron) to train those two conflicting groups of students to play drama as a medium through which they can understand each other better. Although initially it is difficult for Azman to persuade the two leaders from conflicting groups to participate. Finally they enjoy playing drama, as they are able to vent their long suppressed racial hatred openly before they reach a mutual understanding. This film signals the endemic problem of racial prejudice and stereotypes in Malaysia that begin as early as public school (educational institution) as the country’s education system is still race-based

rather than need-based or meritocratic. Hence, educational institutions contribute to perpetuating, rather than fighting against, racial discrimination in Malaysia. For instance, in August 2008, 5,000 Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM) students protested against the proposed Ministry of Selangor state Tan Sri Khalid Ibrahim who asked for UiTM to open 10 percent intake to other races (Chinese and Indians) since the university only accepts Malay and *bumiputera* students and does not open doors for non-Malays (Chinese and Indians).

Perhaps for some the ending of film is seemingly “too easy and simplistic” after a long quarrel and hateful relationship between Khalil and Heng. However, it is noteworthy that rather than political or legal avenue, art (drama) becomes an instrument to reconcile two conflicting groups as well as a medium to understand other different group. As a medium to educate human imagination, art induces a genuine understanding of the beauty of ethnic and racial differences yet with sensitivities to some inherent problems. Initially Azman is reluctant to showcase the drama group in the front of a government officer (as suggested by the school principal) since he disagrees with the idea of art being “politicized” in order to show the success of school in nurturing a harmonious community of students from different ethnic backgrounds. When the two conflicting student groups finally perform in the front of a government officer from the Ministry of Education, who thinks the performance is too offensive due to bold expression some racial taboos in Malaysia, the film clearly criticizes the tendency of the Malaysian government to deal with the issue of multiculturalism in celebratory way, devoid of any social and political complications. Moreover, art is understood as a viable medium with a more universal appeal across racial groups.

In the same vein, Mamat Khalid’s *Estet* (Estate, 2010) dwells on the daily life of a Tamil (Indian) community living in the rubber estate employing Bollywood-style song and dance sequences. Similarly, Afdil Sauki’s *Appalam* (2011), which is a remake of his

award winning film *Papadom* (2009), tells a story of Indian (Tamil) community in their relations with Malay community enriched with a romance. *Appalaam* won the Best Film at the Inaugural Malaysian Indian Film Festival in Chennai, Tamil Nadu in January 2012. According to Sauki, when he first filmed *Appalam* three years ago his intention was to give the local Tamil audience a film that they could enjoy. However, the storyline has to have Malaysian subject matter. *Appalam* is about 17-year old Suthi who runs away from a constant control of her devoted father (Appalasamy) by continuing her study in Kuala Lumpur. To some extent, this film echoed a theme of the struggle of Malaysian Tamil minority to attain a better education in the first Malaysian Tamil indie film titled *Chemman Chalaai* (The Gravel Road, 2005) directed by Deepak Kumaran Menon. While in *Chemman Chalaai* the Malaysian Tamils are only visible characters throughout the story, in Menon's following film *Chalanggai* (Dancing Bells, 2007), there are minor Chinese (bike shop owner) and Malay characters (dance guru and car wash customer) as the story is set in Brickfields, a residential neighborhood located outside central Kuala Lumpur and known as Kuala Lumpur's Little India due to the high percentage of Indian residents and businesses.

Multiethnic characters with equal roles in the narrative appear in Arvind Abraham's *S'kali* (lit. All Together, 2006) and Arvind Abraham's and Benji Lim's *The Joshua Tapes* (2010). *S'kali* is about five young people of different races: Ravin (Indian), Bahir (Malay), Sze Huey and Tzao (both Chinese) and Tehmia (Eurasian). They are close friends and frequently seen together, sharing thoughts and feelings about themselves and pessimism about their country as the social system in their country still creates inequalities, prejudice and injustice among different ethnic groups. Meanwhile *The Joshua Tapes* tells the story of three friends (Malay, Chinese and Indian) on a trip to scatter the ashes of their good friend (Joshua) in which they argue with other and their personal problems almost destroy their friendship.

It is important to note that the marginalization and discrimination against Malaysian Indians as cinematically depicted in independent films coincided with the birth of a big social movement in Malaysia in the same period. On 25 November 2007 the Hindu Rights Action Force (Hindraf), a coalition of 30 Hindu non-governmental organizations committed to the preservation of Hindu community rights and heritage in multiracial Malaysia, staged a mass rally (attended by about 30,000 people) in Kuala Lumpur carrying its slogan “people’s power” (*makkal sakthi* in Tamil). This movement was triggered by a series of demolitions of Hindu temples and the discriminatory policies which favor ethnic Malays. Although Hindraf did not succeed in taking its historical grievances to the British and suffered several internally inflicted and arrestment of the leaders by the Malaysian authority, it has managed to bring the plight of the Malaysian Indians to light and Hindraf continues to be a focus of political action today.

Clearly, both indie filmmakers in Indonesia and Malaysia respond critically to the crisis of racial and religious pluralism in their contemporary societies. Although the crisis of pluralism might reflect the continuation of racial and religious discrimination and injustice despite the newly founded democratic climate, young filmmakers of both countries persistently create new possibilities of a more inclusive and democratic society and reconfigure the relationship among different racial and religious groups through cinematic representations. In the context of Malaysia, non-Malay filmmakers (Indian and Chinese) deal with unfair film regulations (which tend to benefit Malay filmmakers) and their marginal position within society as “strangers” in their own country. Not surprisingly, to a certain extent their films canalize their angst, anger and frustration against the unfair social and political system as well as their hope for more equal society. However, according to Muthalib (2012), the angst of young filmmakers “might encourage them to continue their struggle, as it is from such tension and conflict that

great narrative arise" (p.29). Meanwhile, unlike Malaysian cinema, Indonesian film audiences are less fragmented (divided along with racial line). Therefore, Indonesian young filmmakers are able to make films that embrace a broader audience without any language barriers although they tackle issue of particular ethnic group in society. In addition, the more open interpretation and practice of Islam in Indonesia allowing them to tackle issues of pluralism in an Islamic-theme film as will be discussed extensively in the following section.

Islamic-themed Films and Issue of Pluralism and Equality

Issues of pluralism and equality are not only found in the aforementioned films, but some Islamic-themed films (*film Islami*) actively disseminate the idea of pluralism including gender equality in the Muslim community such as Hanung Bramantyo's *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban* (Woman with Turban, 2009) and Nurman Hakim's *3 Doa 3 Cinta* (3 Wishes 3 Loves; international title *Pesantren*, 2008). In contrast, given strict Islamic interpretations (orthodoxy) and practices in Malaysia, it is hard to find Islamic-themed films critically dealing with issue of pluralism in Malaysian society. Ed Zarith's and Hairie Othman's *2 Alam* (2 Realms/Transverse) is an exception as it attempts to tackle issue of alternative sexuality in Malay Muslim community. Most Islamic films tend to promote individual piety of the urban and modern Muslim family in the context of contemporary conditions, but they tend to overlook issue of religious pluralism and political issues related to Indonesian and Malaysian Muslims.¹⁶

¹⁶ Inspired by the commercially success of Hanung Bramantyo's *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* (Verses of Love, 2008), many film producers attempted to make a Islamic-theme film to emulate the success of *Ayat-Ayat Cinta*. A film critic Eric Sasono (2013, p.50) notes that from 2008 to 2011 there were at least 17 Islamic-theme films in which some adapted popular novels. For Hanung, *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* was simply a commercial film without any Islamic mission and he never expected its success, while *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban* was a "statement" of current crisis of religious pluralism in Indonesia (personal interview, 24 December 2011). By the same token, in Malaysia, Ahmad Idham's *Syurga Cinta* (Heavenly Love, 2009) was a box-office movie in 2009 and Osman Ali's *Ombak Rindu* (The Wave of Passions, 2011) also hit box-office in 2011. Previously, Eddie Pak's *Syukur 21* (Gratitude 21, 2000) starred by the popular Islamic a cappella Raihan won a special jury

Perempuan Berkalung Sorban is perhaps the first Islamic-themed film critically dealing with gender issues. The film is based on the award-winning novel of the same title written by a female Muslim activist and educator Abidah El Khalieqy who has a *pesantren* educational background in Jombang (East Java). Some Muslim leaders such as Ali Mustafa Yacub (imam of Istiqlal Grand Mosque), Tifatul Sembiring (the president of Prosperous Justice Party or PKS) and Majelis Ulama Indonesia (The Indonesian Ulama Council) condemned the film and sought a boycott it. In contrast, Meutia Hatta (former Minister of Women Affairs) and Islamic scholar and feminist Siti Musdah Mulia warmly welcomed the film since it promotes women's rights and equality within Muslim community. According to film director Hanung Bramantyo, *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban* was his attempt to dispel the label as a pro-polygamy or "religious rightist" film director which he earned following his film *Ayat-Ayat Cinta*. *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban* deals with women's issues (i.e. arranged marriage, domestic violence, female subordination) with feminist perspective inspired by the real experiences of his wife, his own mother and the author of novel herself (personal interview with Hanung Bramantyo, 24 December 2011). In an interview the author of *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban*, Abidah El Khalieqy, recounted that the novel was commissioned by the Yogyakarta-based Fatayat Welfare Foundation under the auspices of Nahdlatul Ulama, the largest Muslim organization in Indonesia, with the aim of socializing the reproductive rights of women that have been ratified by the United Nations (Heryanto, 2014, p.61). She was also inspired by the Indonesian translation of Nawal El Sadawi's *Emra'a Enda Noktat El Sifr* (Women at Point Zero) and other feminist literary works that have been discussed widely among student activists in the 1980s and 1990s. The obvious feminist vision of this film highlights the vast anti-polygamy sentiment in Indonesia which can be dated

award and best music scoring at the Malaysian Film Festival (FFM) 2001. In short, most of Islamic-theme films bring positive sentiments to Islam, which can be achieved through propagating Islamic teachings and persuading audience to righteousness.

back to the protests of 30 women movements in Jakarta against the “Polygamy Award” in 2003 granted by a fried chicken businessman Puspowardoyo, condemning the awards as an insult to woman’s dignity. Similarly, women groups and religious leaders were upset when the Polygamy Club in Indonesia was launched in 2009 and the Indonesian branch of the Obedient Wives Club (originally founded on 3 June 2011 by the conservative Islamic group Global Ikhwan in Malaysia) was opened on 19 June 2011 since the club is considered as backward in women emancipation and respect of women’s rights by keeping women as subordinate and marginal.

Perempuan Berkalung Sorban dwells on the life of Anissa (Arabic word and the name of the surah in the Quran meaning “woman”) who is very assertive, critical and open-minded young woman and daughter of the respected *kyai* (religious teacher) of the *pesantren salafy* Al Huda (a very conservative Islamic boarding school that carries out strict gender separation and teaches only classical texts or *kitab kuning*) in small town of East Java. Anissa is like a modern Kartini (a famous national hero for women emancipation movement during colonial era) because she fights for women rights and equality within the Islamic community. While most of Anissa’s family members are very conservative and adhere to Islamic teachings, her uncle Khudori always comforts and understands her ideas and restlessness. Anissa also introduces the novel *Bumi Manusia* (This Earth of Mankind) written by an Indonesian leftist and banned author Pramoedya Ananta Toer to the female students in his father’s *pesantren*.¹⁷ In the film, the banned book appears in five scenes of the film, including those in which Anissa reads and cradles the copies. Interestingly, unlike in the novel there is a scene which the male

¹⁷ The novel *Bumi Manusia* is the first of Buru Quartet (*Anak Semua Bangsa/ Child of All Nations*, *Jejak Langkah/ Footsteps* and *Rumah Kaca/ House of Glass*) written while the author served more than 10 years in exile on the penal island of Buru (the largest island within Maluku islands). The Buru Quartet is a series chronicling the development of Indonesian nationalism and partly based on Toer’s experience growing up during the Indonesian revolutionary period. Toer had been sentenced without trial during the New Order’s systematic destruction of the political left following the massacre against communist party members and supporters in 1965-66. Both Toer and his novels became the target of the New Order’s persecution and repression and the ban on his novel remains even after *Reformasi*.

teachers confiscate copies of Toer's novels and burn along with other books deemed dangerous. It should be noted that on 13 October 1981, the Office of Attorney rejected allegations that they had burned 10,000 copies of *Bumi Manusia* and its sequel *Anak Semua Bangsa* (Child of All Nations), instead admitting burned 972 copies. In the late 1980s, the state court in Yogyakarta persecuted three students for possessing and discussing Toer's banned book (Heryanto, 2006). Not surprisingly, film critic Eric Sasono argues that the scene in which Anissa carries Toer's novel openly in public means "political statement of ideological inclination rather than just intellectual enrichment" (2013, p.64) assuming the event occurred in 1980s.

As the story evolves, Anissa secretly fall in love with her uncle Khudori, but he cannot accept her love as he is still considered as a close relative for Anissa. Instead, Anissa's father (Kyai Hanan) arranges her marriage with Samsudin who is a son of a respected and famous *kyai* (religious teacher) and has a *pesantren*. Although she has enrolled in the Islamic university in Yogyakarta (Central Java), she finally agrees to marry Samsudin and eventually she discovers Samsudin is an abusive husband. After finishing his study in Al-Azhar (Egypt), Khudori taught at the Kyai Hanan's *pesantren* and again he develops his relationship with Anissa. When Samsudin accuses Anissa and Khudori of having committed adultery, he urged Kyai Hanan to punish them based on *hudud* (Islamic law). Interestingly, in responding to Samsudin's demand Anissa's mother says loudly and firmly to everyone by citing the famous Christian saying "*Hanya yang tidak berdosa yang pertama berhak merajam sang pendosa*" (Only the innocence has the first right to stone the sinner)¹⁸ and the crowd disperse quietly. Since the film made references to the Bible and work of leftist and banned author, it inevitably has incited controversies within conservative Muslim community.

¹⁸ For Christians, Anissa's mother saying is perhaps a reminder for the allusion to the "Pericope Adulterae" and the words of Jesus ("He that is without sin among you, let him cast a stone at her", Gospel of John 8:7) (as cited in Heryanto, 2014, p.64).

It should be noted that as female protagonist, Anissa is quite assertive in terms of her sexuality. Indeed, there are some sexually aggressive women characters in Indonesian cinema, but they are usually villains and often doomed.¹⁹ Hence many were shocked when the protagonist (heroine) character in an Islamic-themed film is both pious and sexually assertive, particularly in the midst of undergoing Islamization in Indonesian society. Having experienced endless abuse and humiliation from her husband and other male members of her family, Anissa is excited to meet Khudori (the only good male character in the film) after he finished his study in Al Azhar University (Egypt). The time comes, when the two are alone, she takes off her headscarf and invite him to make love and then embrace him quickly. Rather than use neutral words connoting “make love” such as “*tiduri aku*” or “*setubuhi aku*,” she says “*zihani aku*” (“*zinah*” means illegal fornication in Islam) that has a heavy religious overtone, underscoring the sinfulness of the act. Analyzing *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban*, Heryanto (2014, p.63) argues that Anissa’s choice of words highlights “her conscious and bold defiance of the religious moral code that prevails in environment.” Indeed, this cannot be simply understood as provocation from the filmmaker against the religious conservatives, but rather a form of discursive intervention through cinematic representation into the rigidity of new moral force in contemporary Indonesian society.

Like *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban*, set against the traditional Islamic boarding school in the Central of Java, Nurman Hakim’s *3 Doa 3 Cinta* (3 Wishes 3 Loves) tells the coming of age story of three school boys (Huda, Rian and Syahid) who are contemplating their life in the lead-up to the final examination. The original title of *3 Doa 3 Cinta* was “*Pesantren*” (Islamic boarding school), but the film director used the more

¹⁹ In Indonesian horror films, most antagonist character are females such as, *Kuntilanak* (Vampire), *Sundel Bolong* (Woman with a hole), *Nyai Roro Kidul* (The Goddess of Southern Sea), *Nyi Blorong* (Enchanted Snake), *Si Manis Jembatan Ancol* (lit. The Pretty Girl of Ancol Bridge), and the like. The female monstrous character is probably not unique in the Indonesian case, as we can find rather similar character in other films in Southeast Asia such as *Pontianak* (Malaysia) and *Nangnak* (Thailand).

commercial title for Indonesian release and retained the original title for international release. Funded by some international funding organizations and film festivals such as Global Film Initiative (San Francisco, United States), Goteborg International Film Festival (Sweden) and Fond Sud Cinema (France), the film travelled to various international film festivals and received awards including Best Film at the Jakarta International Film Festival (JIFFEST) in 2008 and Special Jury Award at the Vesoul International Film Festival (France) in 2009. The story of *3 Doa 3 Cinta* was mainly inspired by the real personal experience of the film director Nurman Hakim who spent time in a small *pesantren* in Demak, Central Java. As he remarks, "I have spent my life in *pesantren* in Demak, hence personally I feel obliged to correct misperceptions that *pesantrens* have become a home for radicals and I want to show that there are values of peace and humanity in *pesantren*"²⁰ (Dar, 2008). In addition, Hakim is proud to confess his avid consumption of Iranian films and admiration of award winning Turkish film director Samih Kaplanoğlu (Huda, 2012, p.12). This may affect the way Hakim views Islam in Indonesia from more global or cosmopolitan perspective. Since Nurman Hakim himself is married to filmmaker Nan Triveni Achnas (signatory of "I-Sinema" Manifesto and co-producer of Hakim's film), we can see his spirit to revive Indonesian cinema and his active engagement with current political issues in Indonesia, particularly related to Islam.

The film revolves around the life of Huda, Rian and Syahid during their study in the traditional Islamic boarding school located in the village. While they are attending the same *pesantren*, they came from different family backgrounds that shape their characters. Huda is a pupil of a religious leader who preaches tolerance and peace and seeks to be reunited with his long-lost mother; Rian is an amateur filmmaker, who plans

²⁰ *Saya pernah tinggal di sebuah pondok pesantren di Demak, secara pribadi merasa mempunyai kewajiban untuk meluruskan anggapan yang berkembang bahwa pesantren itu tempat orang-orang yang radikal, dan ingin menunjukkan bahwa sebenarnya di pesantren itu terdapat nilai-nilai kemanusiaan dan kedamaian juga.*

to join a travelling film screening company; Syahid, poor and desperate for money to pay for a liver transplant for his father, joins an extremist religious group and finds himself facing an agonizing moral dilemma. Life changes irrevocably for all three after September 11 2001, when they are arrested and jailed. Rian, who records many events of his surrounding environment, might be an alter ego of the filmmaker, but he also embodies the current development in *pesantren* in Indonesia. Along with the euphoric indie filmmaking after *Reformasi*, we can see the emergence of so-called “*pesantren* film” produced by *santris* (students of Islamic boarding school) in West Java (Cirebon) and Yogyakarta (Huda, 2012). This amateur filmmaking is part of the extra-curricular activity which *pesantren* started embracing new media technology in the learning process.

Both *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban* and *3 Doa 3 Cinta* attempt to create an alternative imagery of *pesantren* as a livable place that inculcates love and fosters peace, in opposition to its image as a training ground for Islamist terrorists seen in the Western mainstream media. Although in the *pesantren* conservative thought still prevails, there is a critical mass that promotes more egalitarian and democratic values (i.e. pluralism, gender equality, etc.) within Muslim community. In particular, according to film critic Eric Sasono (2013, p.65), “*Perempuan Berkalung Sorban* has provided an idea that adherence to Islam is interpreted as a source of activism for women’s rights.” Therefore, along with critical multiculturalism-themed films above, *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban* and *3 Doa 3 Cinta* have imagined the intersection of Islam with democratic values (equality, women rights) in the context of multiethnic and multireligious society.

Unlike its Indonesian counterparts, Malaysian Islamic-themed films rarely tackle issue of pluralism within Malaysian society. While at first glance *2 Alam* may resemble standard (mainstream) Malaysian Islamic-themed films, it boldly confronts the issue of the fate of a Muslim transsexual who commits suicide. Indeed, issues like “transsexual” and “suicide” in the conservative Muslim majority Malaysia can easily bait the local

press and publicity by picking outrageous themes for the sake of entertainment. Moreover, at the premiere and press conference the film producer Dr Rozmey Che Din predicted that the film would earn RM 14 million in the first week and it will have total gross revenue about RM 40 million. In fact, according to report released by the National Film Corporation Malaysia (FINAS) *2 Alam* only earned RM 350,000, substantially less than the film producer's prediction. This is quite understandable since *2 Alam* received unfavorable reviews from the local media and negative responses (buzzes) from audience in social media due to raw exploitation of "sensitive" issues within Muslim community, slow pace of story and excessive flashbacks almost with repetitive images. Putting aside these criticisms and some cinematic flaws, this film poses an interesting problem of how Islam deals with pluralism in terms of alternative sexuality as a contemporary pertinent social issue.

The narrative of *2 Alam* revolves around the burial process of Adam, who changed his name to Amy after she had sex reassignment surgery in London, interspersed with many flashbacks of Adam's troubled past. After the surgery and adopting a new identity, Amy married with a man but in the end Amy divorced and went back to his homeland (Malaysia) and became a popular singer there. Eventually she fell in love with a Malaysian pop singer (Juan Agustin), who is popular in Taiwan. From then on she started ignoring her religion (Islam) and God. One day it is found that she is transvestite and three men rape her in a rubber plantation. Gradually one by one her sins haunted him and finally she hangs herself. When going through the burial, there are many signs that the earth is rejecting the body because she did a great sin. However, film critic and founder of *Twitch* online media, Todd Brown (2010), complained that he was puzzled about what the purpose of Amy/Adam being transsexual. Likewise, Malaysian film critic Fadli Al-Akiti (2010) writes that the film title essentially refers to the uncommon life of Amy/Adam, but the filmmaker did not tell the stories about the

relationship between Adam and his family, friends and Malay community. Of course, this film does not elaborate the background to Adam getting the sex reassignment surgery, but rather shows the problem of being a transsexual living in the Muslim community that still never stops even if he dies. While some Muslims cannot accept transsexuals, in this film a group of Muslims led by a religious teacher is willing to perform a burial for him like normal Muslim without any rejection. The problem emerges for the transgendered corpse because male Muslim are forbidden from bathing female Muslim body and vice versa, while Muslim should bury Muslim body based on Islamic rituals. This may be a good reminder but with a new twist to the dispute between the Hindu family with the local Islamic Religious Affairs Department (*Jawatan Agama Islam*) over a dead man body after the Shariah court has declared the dead man had converted to Muslim before his death.

It can be seen that the issue of pluralism (such as gender and sexual differences; political ideologies) within Muslim community is rarely touched in Islamic-themed films in Indonesia and Malaysia. The reason behind the lack of pluralism is arguably due to the assumption that Islamic teaching is simply incompatible with the idea of pluralism or most Muslims are deemed too “sensitive” to be open to discussing pluralism. This makes most commercial film producers reluctant to take any risks to make such films that might create controversy and fail at the box offices. However, a few film producers and filmmakers have made Islamic-themed films to deal with real issues of pluralism in Muslim community in order to evoke more open-minded attitude among Muslims who are living in the plural Indonesian and Malaysian society. In *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban* issue of pluralism is viewed from gender differences and unorthodox interpretation of Islamic teachings (i.e. the openness with Leftist view) in the traditional Islamic boarding school (*pesantren salafiy*). By the same token, *3 Doa 3 Cinta* touches the pluralistic situations in the Islamic boarding school where different aspirations of young Muslim

students come together yet never be shame to acknowledge some problems within students (i.e. the secret desire to join Islamic radicalism and the homoerotic seduction of senior to young students). Unlike those two Indonesian films, *2 Alam* explores the ensuing problem of being transsexual in Muslim community. Interestingly, some signs of earth's rejection to the body seems like are more related to all past sins rather than merely being transsexual. The next section further discusses in details issue of non-heteronormative sexuality.

Transgressing Heteronormative Sexuality

Sexuality as well as sexual identity has been a contentious issues both in Indonesian and Malaysian cinema. Although sexuality is very intimate to every individual's being, the state has played an active role in setting the limits of acceptable sexuality through the process of "normalizing" certain form of sexuality (i.e. sexual behaviors, sexual preference/orientation) over others. As Gayle Rubin (1997) in her famous essay on political economy of sex, wrote, "Hunger is hunger, but what counts as food is culturally determined and obtained [...] Sex is sex, but what counts as sex is equally culturally determined and obtained." Thus, anyone who appears to choose sexual expressions that are not sanctioned is demonized and persecuted. Moreover, the depiction of sexuality has always been a subject of film censorship in Indonesia and Malaysia. Rather than acknowledging sexuality as an integral part of human nature, it has been constructed by the censor board as a source of indecency and immorality that may corrupt young people. However, sexuality has been a subject of young filmmakers to express their freedom and to push the boundaries of moral and social norms in contrast to their predecessors. Therefore, this section explores selected contemporary Indonesian and Malaysian films that imagine an alternative sexual identity and provide

other images of sexuality despite the persistence of moral and religious restrictions in expressing different sexuality in both two countries.

One of the daring Malaysian films in 2011 was Khir Rahman's directorial debut *Dalam Botol* (In a Bottle) that surprisingly passed the censor board to be commercially released in major cinemas.²¹ A graduate from ASWARA (Art and National Heritage Academy), Khir Rahman (his real name is Khairulizam bin Abdul Rahman) started his career in theater and then moved into film scene as an actor debuting in Saw Teong Hin's big budget film *Puteri Gunung Ledang* (Princess of the Mount of Ledang, 2004). Since then he played in several films such as Mamat Khalid's *Rock* (2005) and Yasmin Ahmad's *Gubra* (2006) as an antagonist character. *Dalam Botol* received a critical review from film critics in Malaysia. For instance, two Malaysian film critics, Hassan Abd Muthalib and Amir Muhammad, write, "The film had strong performances, excellent use of visual metaphors and use of framing [...] The film bravely explores gay relationships as well as family, religious and cultural beliefs" (p.330). Moreover, a review in *The Associated Press* described *Dalam Botol* as "playful, drawing comparisons with Ang Lee's Oscar-winning *Brokeback Mountain* [2005] and Wong Kar Wai's classic, *Happy Together* [1997]." Interestingly, despite the obvious representation of homosexuality, film scholar Maszalida Hamzah notes that *Dalam Botol* calls for "reinterpretation of the fundamental pillars of the Islamic faith but also challenges the societal and popular acceptance of reality in their own countryards" (Hamzah, 2012, p. 288). However, the film director Khir Rahman is aware that his film may attract limited audience due to the quite serious theme (Syafaat, 2011). Although it was claimed that *Dalam Botol* earned RM

²¹ Interestingly, the film producer of *Dalam Botol*, Raja Azmi Raja Sulaiman, was well known as a harsh critic of late Yasmin Ahmad's films. In one TV reality program, she objected some elements in Yasmin's films as they contaminate "Malay culture." Criticized for her past criticism against Yasmin Ahmad might curb Yasmin's freedom of expression, Raja Azmi says, "I have never said Yasmin Ahmad should stop making film. If I was on the censorship board, I would not have censored Yasmin's movies. I would have given her creative freedom to express herself. I just dislike some elements in her movies and I was expressing my opinion. I am entitled to it." (Bissme, 2009).

1 million, many doubted it as a marketing tactic since it only got RM 300,000²² (Gebang Syed, 2011, p.4). Despite the issue of commercial failure, the film director has a clear vision about his film: “The job of a filmmaker is to tell stories and that’s what I did with this film. I’m telling you a true story about a man who had a sex change operation but later felt trapped with the decision he made. I’m not judging him. Neither am I punishing him. I just want to tell his story as honestly as possible” (Bissme, 2009). By telling this uncommon story of someone who has made a brave decision to change his sexual identity, the filmmaker attempts to imagine more open and inclusive society that accepts any differences in terms of sexual identity.

The story of *Dalam Botol* revolves around the relationship between Ruby (his real name is Rubidin) and his partner Ghaus. Motivated by simple wish made by Ghaus (he once said to Rubidin “if you are a woman...”), Rubidin was willing to change his sexual identity in order to please Ghaus. Rubidin (Ruby) eventually undergoes a sex reassignment surgery, but he likely has misunderstood Ghaus intention. Ghaus was not happy with the current physical appearance of Ruby as a woman and he decided to end his relationship with Ruby. After his broken relationship with Ghaus, Ruby returned to his village (kampong) to find a sanctuary and resolve his problem. Unexpectedly, Ruby’s male hormones were unregulated and he turned to Rubidin again. Eventually Rubidin fell in love with a nice and beautiful woman from his kampong and he planned to married her. At the wedding ceremony, Ghaus came to Rubidin’s house and asked for his love, but the situation has already changed and Rubidin’s is emotionally in limbo.

²² Regarding the motive of making a film, the film producer Raja Azmi remarks, “[I] make movies not to make money. I make movies to get satisfaction. I have said many times that making movies is like delivering baby. No matter how painful it is to deliver a baby as a woman, I still want to deliver more. When you see your baby growing up, you get a certain satisfaction. Same goes for my movies. They are the legacy I am leaving behind (...) The other reason I love making movies is because I love being in the limelight and making movies is one way to be in the limelight” (Bissme, 2009).



Figure 3.3. Still from Khir Rahman's *Dalam Botol*

After Rubidin (Ruby) has sex reassignment surgery, his relationship with his boyfriend Ghaus is in trouble, as Ghaus still wants Rubidin as a man rather than a woman.

Of course, the precedence of filmic representation of alternative sexuality can be found in Kirdar Sharma's *Kaki Kuda* (1958), Jamil Sulong's *Tuan Badul* (1979), Osman Ali's *Bukak Api* (2000) and Shuhaimi Baba's *Waris Jari Hantu* (2007). However, *Dalam Botol* attempts to portray homosexuality less in stereotypical way and explore deeply the psyche of homosexuals in the Malaysian context. In an interview, film director Khir Rahman remarks, "I am looking for anything that may impress the audience. We want to empathize to the male [protagonist] who has lost his maleness and gets upset after his partner just dumped him"²³ (Syafaat, 2011, p.15). While *Dalam Botol* is to a certain extent still complicit with hetero-normativity, it brings to the fore issue of homosexuality to the Malaysian film audience. It should be noted that the film is also set in a Malay rural community that is Muslim. In particular, the scene in Rubidin's kampong clearly depicts the difficulties of Rubidin to return to "normal" life and hide his past sexual identity from kampong people. Thus, the film sends a clear message to the Muslim community to

²³ *Saya memang mencari apa sahaja yang boleh memberi kesan pada penonton. Kita mahu semua rasakan kesengsaraan seorang lelaki yang hilang kelakiannya kemudian kesal bila ditinggalkan kekasihnya.*

recognize the existence of gay people in Malaysia and extend their empathy to gay people's life. As a film critic Fadli Al-Akiti (2011) writes while *Dalam Botol* exposes the current social consensus on homosexuality in Malaysia, it provides a chance for the audience to judge the minority people with an open-minded perspective. Responding to criticisms against his film that might evoke anti-gay sentiment, Khir Rahman simply says, "All I can say is that this [*Dalam Botol*] is not a religious film, and I am not preaching anything here. It's just a man who feels trapped and miserable" (Bissme, 2011). Rahman's view of the subject of his film is in tune with an opinion of film producer Raja Azmi Raja Sulaiman, "My movie is targeted at those who are contemplating sex change [...] I have a few friends who are gay. As a Muslim, it is said that you should not be supporting them. But I understand them as human beings and I am not going to judge them. Whatever their sins, it is between God and them. It is for God to judge them" (Bissme, 2009, para 5-6).

The precedence of homosexuality issue in Indonesian cinema after the 1998 *Reformasi* can be found first in *Kuldesak*. Although the depiction of homosexuality only occupies in one segment and the first man-to-man kissing scene was deleted in commercial release in Indonesia, the film is still surely "a reflection of the growing visibility of the Indonesian gay movement" (Clark, 2010, p.84). However, the ending of this film still conforms to the difficulties to be openly gay in Indonesia as one of the gay characters finally chooses to accept the dominant norm (hetero-normativity) in which gayness is perceived as social deviance and return to his family after he experienced a violent attack.

Five years after *Kuldesak* witnessed the release of Nia Dinata's *Arisan!* (*The Gathering*, 2003) which portrays the Jakartan middle class gay community in affirmative and non-discriminatory way. Arguably, this film opened up a new avenue for various representations of sexuality and gender issue in Indonesian cinema in the following

years.²⁴ In her analysis of Nia Dinata's *Arisan!* along with Nanang Istiabudi's *Detik Terakhir* (2005) and Rudi Soedjarwo's *Tentang Dia* (2005) that depict non-normative sexualities, Maimunah (2010, p.115) calls these films "ground-breaking portrayals of sexual minorities produced in post New Order period." Further, she argues that queer characters in those films strive to negotiate heteronormativity and construct a particular queerness that may offer distinctive characteristic that differ from Western sexualities. Moreover, *Arisan!* received several awards (including Best Film Director) in Indonesian and international film festivals. As the film's co-writer and gay filmmaker, Joko Anwar asserts that *Arisan!* was intended to change the simplistic and homophobic representations in the New Order films. Similarly, the story of one character in the film was inspired by personal experience of the film director Nia Dinata especially her grandmother's acceptance of her uncle's homosexuality (Maimunah, 2010, p.120).

The story of gay relationship between Sakti and Nino in *Arisan!* is set in a close-knit middle class community in the capital Jakarta who meet regularly and exchange gossip or personal stories. As an only child in a Batak family, Sakti is under pressure from his family to marry and preserve the continuity of his family lineage. The problem starts when Nino Aditya who is an openly gay film producer, approaches Sakti and he cannot hide his feelings. Encouraged by his friends and Nino, Sakti finally admits (comes out) to his mother (Grace). Fortunately, Sakti's mother does not react negatively since she is always protective and does anything to keep Sakti happy. However, many criticized *Arisan!* for not representing the diversity of gay culture in Indonesia and it does not portray the difficulties of being gay in more religious and conservative settings. Not surprisingly, according to Maimunah (2010, p.118), "Sakti's [gay protagonist character] coming out is not intended as a realistic representation of

²⁴ Ben Murtagh (2008, p.2) notes, from 2002 to 2008 almost 20 films deal with sexual and gender themes, "though almost all of these films reveal at least some level of ambivalence towards homosexuality."

Indonesian gay culture, but as an illustration of how *gay* men can be accepted in the *normal* world if coming out is handled in gradual and non-confrontational way.”

Meanwhile, Teddy Soeriaatmadja’s *Lovely Man* (2011) is a good exemplar of an alternative representation of sexual minority (particularly transgenders) in contemporary Indonesian cinema.²⁵ The premier of this film was at the 10th Q-Film Festival in Jakarta in 2011 along with other screenings of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transsexual films and has since travelled to many international film festivals. Unlike previous Indonesian films that portrayed transvestites in a caricature way, *Lovely Man* provides more depth understanding and sympathetic portrait of transgenders in Indonesia. Not surprisingly, the Indonesian premier news magazine *Tempo* selected the lead actor (Donny Damara), female supporting artist (Raihaanun) and the scriptwriter (Teddy Soeriatmadja) of *Lovely Man* as “The Best Artist,” “The Best Female Supporting Artist” and “The Best Film Script” in 2011 respectively because the film represents a transgender character not as a victim or an object of derision like most Indonesian mainstream films (“Waria,” 2011). A *Hollywood Reporter’s* critic praised *Lovely Man* as simply a “lovely” film. Produced by Teddy’s own company Karuna Pictures and Indonesian Film Investment (*Investasi Film Indonesia* or IFI), the front company established in 2005 for a group of private investors to invest film by acting as middleman between filmmakers and investors. This company allows filmmakers to concentrate on the creative aspect of filmmaking without dealing with investors, although it does not necessarily guarantee an open, upfront relationship between them (Barker, 2011, p. 240-41).

²⁵ Generally, in Indonesian cinema transvestite (*waria* or *banci*) becomes a comic character and an object of ridicule (jokes). Transvestite appeared as a main character in Benyamin Sueb’s film *Betty Bencong Slebor* (*Betty, The Scatty Transvestite*, 1979), a comedy about the life of a housemaid named Betty and her friend in the capital Jakarta who struggle to survive in harsh life by fooling their male employer to derail a marriage ceremony. Other films such as teen movie *Catatan Si Boy* (*Boy’s Diary*, Dir. Nasri Cheppy, 1988) has an effeminate gay character (Emon) as a sidekick of the protagonist (Boy). The commercial success of this film spawned five sequels.

Set in contemporary metropolitan Jakarta, the story of *Lovely Man* delves on the life of Ipu (his real name is Saiful) who changed to be a transvestite in order to survive in the metropolitan and escape from his past. The story started when his daughter (Cahaya, literally means "light") as a simple Muslim girl came to Jakarta to visit him since he left her when she was four years old. In searching for her father, Cahaya feels like a foreigner, as she is not used to the hustle and bustle of the big city. Of course, Cahaya is shocked to discover that her father is a transvestite and street prostitute in Taman Lawang. Similarly, Ipu is hesitant to meet his own daughter after several years in such humiliating moment. As the story unfolds they get to know each other. The reason for Cahaya's visit is actually to tell her father that she is pregnant and to ask him for money, as she will deliver a baby. Ipu gives her a sum of money (initially his savings to have a sex reassignment surgery) that he carried off from the loan shark. As a result, the debt collectors chase and torture him and even one of them sodomized him. It should be noted that the traditional figure of "father" in *Lovely Man* has loss of its legitimacy. While the absence (lack) of patriarchal father can be easily interpreted as the loss of strongman (Suharto's New Order regime) in Indonesian political landscape since 1998, it also shows the failure of the father as a paternal model of the state in exercising its responsibilities to Indonesian citizens particularly minority and marginal groups.

In *Lovely Man* an interesting encounter occurs between a simple Muslim girl (Cahaya) and her transvestite father (Ipu) in the capital Jakarta. While Cahaya is wearing a decent Muslim costume with headscarf (*jilbab*), Ipu is wearing a sexy dress like most street prostitutes. This stark image inevitably invites the film audience to reflect the issue of morality, particularly in relation to the sexual minorities in Indonesia. While the film almost realistically portrays the harsh life in the metropolitan city, it aspires for more equal and just treatment (without any hostile discrimination) against sexual minorities. At the same time, in *Lovely Man* the urban space is desired as an

inhospitable or inhabitable place despite many unresolved social problems commonly found in third world countries.



Figure 3.4. Still from Teddy Soeriatmadja's *Lovely Man*

In the first encounter with her father (Ipu), Cahaya gives him a match as a symbol of her love to him.

Another example of filmic representation of transgender (transsexual) is Tonny Trimarsanto's documentary *Renita, Renita* (2007). Although this documentary received funding from the Indonesian Human Rights Commission (*Komas HAM*), it does not fall into a blatant propaganda film. Instead, it was an excellent portrayal of one of minorities groups in Indonesia. *Renita, Renita* tells a story of transgenders as one of sexual minority groups in Indonesia that continuously experienced violent as well as repressive treatments from both state and society. Unlike stereotypical representations of transsexuals in Indonesian mainstream media, this documentary amazingly presents an image of transsexuals without any dramatization of their life. It focuses on a single character, Renita (her original name is Muhamad Zein Pundagau) who comes from Muslim family background in Makassar (South Sulawesi) and a graduate from one of the Islamic university in Makasar. Since Renita's father cannot accept her sexuality, she

must leave Makassar to avoid any embarrassment for her family. She ends up in Jakarta as an assistant at a beauty parlor by day and a street prostitute by night.

Likewise, Poh Si Teng's documentary *Pecah Lobang* (Busted, 2008) focuses on the life of Malay Muslim transgender (*mak nyah*), Natasha, who lives under constant fear of the police and religious authorities. For instance, on 27 July 2008 religious officials in Kelantan (*Jabatan Hal Ehwal Agama Islam Kelantan*) raided a *mak nyah* beauty pageant and 16 *mak nyahs* were arrested. Moreover, the federal religious official (Jawatan Agama Islam Wilayah Persekutuan or JAWI) regularly arrests *mak nyahs* if they solicit clients and JAWI will lock them up for two weeks in the same prison with robbers and killers. Since the position of *mak nyahs* in Malaysia (there are estimated 25,000 to 30,000 *mak nyahs* across Malaysia) is difficult, they end up as sex workers who solicit clients from the street. As Natasha states, "They [government and mainstream society] cannot accept us. We cannot get [proper] jobs." In other words, being a *mak nyah* is not only socially stigmatized, but they are also legally criminalized. In an interview, *ustaz* Dr Muhammad Uthman El-Muhammady remarks that Islamic teachings says transsexual is not normal and even Prophet Muhammad condemns men dressing as women and vice versa. Therefore, on 13 April 1982 the Fatwa Council of Malaysia (*Majlis Fatwa Malaysia*) issued a fatwa banning sex reassignment surgery for Muslims. This *fatwa* was supported by the conference of Rulers (*Majlis Raja-Raja*) on 24 February 1984. Due to the ban on sex reassignment surgery for Muslim *mak nyah* in Malaysia, Muslim *mak nyahs* (including Natasha) must suppress their intention to have the surgery although they really want to have it. Not surprisingly, in the end of film Natasha wants to leave Malaysia as the country does not accept transsexuals and never gives a chance to *mak nyahs* to be successful and lead a good life.

From *Lovely Man, Dalam Botol, Renita-Renita* and *Pecah Lobang*, we can see the notion of transgender (“*waria*”²⁶ in Indonesia and “*mak nyah*”²⁷ in Malaysia) and gay are conflated and blurred. It is worth noting that *waria* and *mak nyah* are attributed to male bodies. Unsurprisingly, they almost never describe themselves as a “third gender” but rather see themselves as men with women’s souls who therefore dress like women and are attracted to men. They usually have sex with “real” men and are not typically pressured to marry heterosexually (Boellstroff, 2005, p.57). In the years after *Reformasi*, *warias* in Indonesia have become more visible in public life than gays or lesbians, from their common role as beauticians to appearance in television shows.²⁸ However, this public visibility cannot directly be translated into acceptance, as there is a continuation of disapproval and rejection in many cases. People often make fun of *warias*, but they are usually recognized as existing elements of Indonesian society (Boellstroff, 2007). In contrast, it is almost impossible to find the visibility of *mak nyahs* in public in Malaysia except as sex workers in Chow Kit district in Kuala Lumpur. While the degree of openness can be found in Indonesia rather than in Malaysia regarding the public visibility of transgender (transvestite), the acceptance of homosexuality or male to male

²⁶ The term “*waria*” is a melding of two words: “*WANita*” (female) and “*pRIA*” (male). Ben Murtagh defines *waria* as “male transvestites who are male bodied but generally describe themselves as having female soul” (2013, 5). In 1978, the Minister of Religious Affairs, Alamsyah Ratu Perwiranegara, introduced the term *waria* in response to concerns that the name of prophet was associated with the previously used term “*wadam*” (Boellstroff as cited in Murtagh, 2013, p.5). *Wadam* is joining two words: *WANita* (female) and *aDAM* (Adam) or *haWA* (Eve) and *aDAM* (Adam). This term had been introduced by the Jakarta governor Ali Sadikin in 1960s in order to acknowledge the city’s transgender citizen with certain degree of recognition and protection. Derogatory terms for *waria* are “*banci*” and “*bencong*.” For more detailed study of representation of *waria* in Indonesian cinema particularly in 1970s, see Murtagh (2013).

²⁷ “*Mak nyah*” (“*mak*” meaning mother) is a local term in Malaysia for male transsexuals. *Mak nyah* refers to those who have not undergone sex change operations and those who have (Teh, 2001). The term *mak nyah* was coined by male transsexuals community when they attempted to set up a society but denied by the Registrar of Societies in Malaysia (Teh, 2001). The term for female transsexuals is “*pak nyah*” (“*pak*” meaning father) or sometimes known as “*tomboy*.” Meanwhile, “*pondan*” and “*bapok*”, which refer to effeminate male, are derogatory terms for *mak nyah*. For an interesting discussion on the influence of culture and religion to *mak nyah* identity, see Teh (2001).

²⁸ Historically, *warias* in Indonesia worked in lowbrow entertainment, as market traders or sex workers, and now are closely associated with hair salons and bridal make-up (Boellstroff, 2007).

sexuality is still problematic (if not completely impossible). This situation becomes more complicated due to current intensification of societal Islamization process in Indonesia and state-sponsored Islamization or bureaucratization of Islam in Malaysia. Before intensification of Islamization in Indonesia, Javanese society was quite open with non-normative sexuality, as American anthropologist James L. Peacock in his classic book on Javanese performing art entitles *Rites of Modernization, Symbolic Aspect of Indonesian Proletarian Drama* (1968) notes:

“Pure” Javanese tradition does not condemn homosexuality and regards a very wide range of behavior, from he-man to rather (in our terms) “effeminate,” as properly masculine. Therefore, Javanese who condemn the transvestite are probably doing so from the standpoint of Javanese masculinity influenced by Islam, but the transvestite legitimizes himself in term of “pure” (non-Islamicized) Javanese ideals (as cited in Murray, 1997, p.259).

In the broader context of Southeast Asia, Peletz (2006) has noted that between the fifteenth and eighteenth century Southeast Asia was characterized by gender egalitarianism and considerable female autonomy. Moreover, there were culturally sanctioned positions for transgender individuals. For instance, the *sida-sida* (male who dressed as female and had male-gendered partners) in Malaysia and *bissu* in ethnic Bugis in South Sulawesi (Indonesia) had important ritual and royal duties. Furthermore, until the late 1960s “specialized homosexual villages” existed in Kelantan, with one even abutting the Sultan’s palace (Lee, 2011, p.99).

With non-heterosexual gender identities becoming associated with Malaysia’s Other (usually the West) and with an increasingly conservative Islam on the rise in Malaysia, the spaces that non-heterosexual individuals can inhabit in society are greatly constrained. Hence those who cannot conform to gender norms are the targets of regular public opprobrium. Meanwhile, in contemporary Indonesia alternative gender identities occasionally become the target of violent attacks by conservative Islamist groups in order to conduct moral policing. Despite many criticisms against *Dalam Botol* due to the

complicity to the dominant heterosexual norm, the film is quite transgressive in portraying a homosexual character (Rubidin/Ruby) that does not conform to the Film Censorship Guidelines (2010) which required homosexual characters in Malaysian films to repent or “go straight” by the end of the film. Instead, Rubidin/Ruby, who attempts to be “straight” (“real man”), is unable to have a (normal) heterosexual relationship with a woman and he feels very sad and frustrated in the end of the film. In contrast, Ipuy character in *Lovely Man* is more assertive and determined with his sexuality (he even planned to undergo a sex reassignment surgery) despite the persistence of social stigma as well as discrimination against transgenders. The persistence of discrimination is clearly reflected when one of the goons threatens Ipuy who is brutally tortured: “Nobody bothers when one transvestite dies in Jakarta” (*Satu banci mati di Jakarta nggak ada yang nyari*). Therefore, both *Dalam Botol* and *Lovely Man* not only make transgender cinematically visible and audible, but most importantly they project the possibilities of alternative sexuality and the ongoing struggle for equality through the medium of cinema despite the continuation of social stigma and discrimination in Indonesian and Malaysian society. As Rey Chow (2007, p.11) writes, “[B]ecoming visible is no longer simply a matter of becoming visible in the visual sense (as an image or object) but also a matter of participating in a discursive politics of (re)configuring the relation between center and margins, a politics in which what is visible may be a key but not the exclusive determinant.”

Conclusion

In this chapter I have illustrated a multitude of cinematic imageries of contemporary Indonesian and Malaysian society in the throes of socio-political changes. I argue that while the current socio-political conditions in Indonesia and Malaysia reflect the crisis of religious and racial pluralism paradoxically in an open political climate,

contemporary Indonesian and Malaysian cinema offer a possibility of democratic and egalitarian society as can be seen in *Gie*, *CINtA*, *Cin(t)ta*, *3 Hati*, *Dua Dunia*, *Satu Cinta*, *Tanda Tanya*, *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban*, *3 Doa*, *3 Cinta*, *Sepet*, *Gubra*, *Gaduh*, *Nasi Lemak 2.0* and *Petaling Street Warriors*. It should be clear that contemporary Indonesian and Malaysian cinema have a critical potential to interrupt the celebratory multiculturalism as propagated by the government of both countries. At the same time, they unveil some problems within a plural society yet offer a dreamed (imagined) society that truly recognizes differences and nurtures a common aspiration for egalitarian and democratic values. In other words, Indonesian and Malaysian cinema does not merely reflect current socio-political conditions, but, rather, they construct the future of plural society rooted in social life rather than simply project a dreamlike illusion.

Like issues of religious and racial pluralism, sexuality is always sensitive and even controversial in Indonesian and Malaysian cinema as it intersects with social norms and taboos. Interestingly, for young filmmakers sexuality is a crucial site to fight for political equality especially for sexual minorities like gays, lesbians and transgender. Furthermore, the portrayals of gay men in *Dalam Botol* and transgender in *Lovely Man* are not only unconventional, but, most importantly, suggest more egalitarian perspective of sexual minorities in the Muslim-majority countries. Therefore, both films evoke the possibility of expressing alternative sexual identity despite the dominant heterosexual normativity and the persistence of discrimination against minority groups. This clearly echoes Ranciere's idea of "the part of no part" precisely because contemporary indie cinemas in Indonesia and Malaysia both reveal the functioning of certain distribution of the visible and invisible, and they bring the invisible to visibility. Put differently, Indonesian and Malaysian indie cinema are counting the "unaccountable" (i.e. religious, ethnic and sexual minority groups) that had not been recognized and neglected by the existing political order. Finally, the multitude cinematic imageries of society in

contemporary Indonesian and Malaysian cinema might provide the impetus towards a politics of possibilities that offers an alternative space for imagining the becoming democratic and egalitarian society in both countries. The next chapter further extends the discussion of the becoming democratic society by examining spatial aspects of social issues (urban crisis, troubled youth and marginal place) as represented in cinematic imageries.

CHAPTER 4
INHABITING AN IMAGINARY SPACE:
URBAN AND PERIPHERIAL IMAGERIES OF CONTEMPORARY
INDONESIAN AND MALAYSIAN SOCIETY

*Cinema is what it will become,
what the public and filmgoers as a whole want to be.*

Jean-Luc Godard (2001, p.3).

*The cinema gives us a substitute world
which fits our desires.*

Andre Bazin (cited in Adair, 1999, p.51)

While the previous chapter explored some salient social issues in contemporary Indonesian and Malaysian cinema, this chapter focuses on urban and peripheral imaginaries. More than their function as a narrative background in cinema, urban and peripheral spaces bear “the trace of political projects and ideological messages” (Natali, 2006). The centralistic tendency of development policy both in Indonesia and Malaysia have made peripheral areas almost out of progress, while in contrast the capital cities of Jakarta and Kuala Lumpur are significantly overdeveloped. The political changes brought about by *Reformasi* have redirected the gaze of filmmakers to the periphery and at the same time sharpened their critical view to the center (primary city). Moreover, in recent years there is a shift in contemporary Indonesian and Malaysian cinema from merely character-driven story to other layer like spaces and places that make stories resonate with complex social problems. Therefore, the aim of this chapter is to illustrate the cinematic imaginings of urban and rural/peripheral spaces with their ensuing problems that might lead to the construction of possible places beyond existing socio-political conditions.

In this chapter I argue that the construction of place in contemporary Indonesian and Malaysian indie cinemas not only highlights the spatial dimension of current political conditions, but also points out the crucial position of space in shaping the democratic as well as egalitarian politics in both countries. As Jacques Rancière argues, “Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has ability to see to talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time” (2004, p.13). Hence, the spatial dimension is inseparable from democratic politics in which cinema contributes to constructing an imaginary space of modern society. Put differently, cinema has trained people’s senses to experience modern life through spatial images; hence, images of the city and country imperceptibly becomes imagined spaces which people inhabit.

In order to substantiate my argument, this chapter is divided into three main sections. The first section illustrates the intertwinement of urban crisis and troubled youth in which cityscape in Indonesia and Malaysia becomes an imaginary space to deal with private matters and contemporary social problems by examining selected films, which tackle that issue. Unlike previous films, the construction of urban landscape is not merely used by filmmakers to launch their critique against the modern life or to be employed as an allegory of the moral emptiness of consumer society. Rather, filmmakers use the urban landscape like indoor spaces of cityscape such as shopping mall, hotel room, club and home as a springboard to imagine an inhabitable place or imaginary space beyond current socio-political conditions. Extending the discussion in the first section, the second section focuses on racialized (ethnicized) space especially in the capital Kuala Lumpur and Jakarta, which is partly inherited from the colonial racial policy yet heightened by the ethnic supremacist politics and ethnic assimilationist policy in Malaysia’s and Indonesia’s plural societies, and its implication for imagining a democratic and equal society. The third section outlines the emergence of regionalism

that has shifted filmic narratives from the center to the periphery and constructed peripheral spaces as an embodiment of tradition, cultural heritage, and hope. In particular, this section focuses on Kelantan in Malaysia and the maritime part of Indonesian territory since these remote and marginal places are nearly absent in cinematic representation in both countries.

The Urban Breakdown and Troubled Youth

Urban areas in both Indonesia and Malaysia are not only a signature of economic progress, but are also an important site for political change and social transformation during *Reformasi*, particularly the capital Jakarta and Kuala Lumpur. At the height of *Reformasi* most of the mass rallies and demonstrations against the authoritarian regimes were held in the capital city and eventually spread to other cities across the country. At the same time, the capital city has been a showcase of the success of economic development project despite some ensuing problems of development. Jakarta has a unique position among Indonesian cities as it is not only the government administration center, but it is also country's commercial and financial center despite the continuing problem of overcrowding and congestion. Unlike the capital Jakarta as government administration center, Kuala Lumpur mainly serves Malaysian commercial and financial center as from 1999 the seat of government was shifted to the planned city Putrajaya located 25 kilometers south of Kuala Lumpur.

Most Indonesian and Malaysian mainstream films usually depict the complex city life that is ethically dubious and usually associated with negative Western influences¹ in contrast to village areas or rural life as nostalgic, authentic, innocence with

¹ The perfect exemplar of such film was Turino Junaedi's controversial film *Bernafas Dalam Lumpur* (Breathing in the Mud, 1970) that epitomizes the painful and tortuous journey of a village woman (Supinah) who leaves her child to look for her husband in Jakarta. She ends up as a prostitute after being sexually exploited by various men. As Paramadhita (2011) puts it, "In visualizing national reality through the city, New Order filmmakers shared their anxiety of the

noble naiveté. In particular, the urban areas are almost routinely depicted in cinema as dark, dysfunctional, engulfed by social crises, seduced by capitalist consumption and paralyzed by crime, class, gender and racial conflicts. In short, filmmakers use urban landscape to give resonance to their critique of moral and emotional decay of modern life. Interestingly, the critique against the negative excess of modernity usually is coupled with the lamentations of youth problems in urban area. In Malaysia, urban youth have been constructed in popular discourses as part of “moral degradation,” “family crisis” (domestic abuse, divorce, incest) and “social ills” (drug abuse, teenage pregnancy, baby abandonment, gangsterism, criminality) and should be controlled and disciplined. Meanwhile, although urban youth in Indonesia share similar issues with the Malaysian counterparts, they have been depicted in the media and popular discourse in Indonesia as an excessive consumer, agent of “Western” lifestyle of deviant social norms and morality.

While some contemporary Indonesian and Malaysian films still portray urban areas and city life as backdrop of acts and events in the film narrative, cinema is increasingly becoming an archive of urban space in which urban modernity is precisely occupied at the center of the Indonesian and Malaysian society experience. Furthermore, contemporary Indonesian and Malaysian cinemas also imagine an urban area (city) as a place of possibilities and hopes that embodies complexity, flexibility and multiple temporalities. Interestingly, in both contemporary Indonesian and Malaysian cinemas the image of urban breakdown intersects with the theme of troubled youth. This is probably because the urban space has always lured the young people to embark their life journey, feel the cosmopolitan spirit and fulfill the desire for consumption. Moreover, urban space in Indonesia and Malaysia is also anonymous, large and open,

urban space as an alienating, capitalist-driven space, resulting in a harsh criticism on people who pursue their desire for and within the city” (p.505). In addition, she argues that the images of city “are often gendered, embodied in the figure of a domineering and sexually loose woman, to fit the filmmaker’s imagination of the bleak national reality “ (Paramadhita, 2011, p. 505).

lacking forms of surveillance and social control found in kampong or smaller city. In particular, the capital Jakarta remains central on the screen since “it is intimate landscape shared by filmmakers, producers, actors and activists: a place where they grew up, learned filmmaking, work, desire, and consume” (Paramadhita, 2011, p.501). Likewise, Kuala Lumpur is the residence of most Malaysian filmmakers and where all supporting facilities for filmmaking can be found. Hence, the cinematic representations of youth in two countries are shaped by the current social problems in the capital Jakarta and Kuala Lumpur. Although both youth in Indonesia and Malaysia and elsewhere live in the same global spaces and cosmopolitan culture, they act in particular local spaces. In Indonesia youth are active participant of consumerist capitalism, members of subcultures, whereas Malaysian youth are a subject to government political mobilization and moral authority correction.

The most notorious film about youth and urban life is Hanny Saputra’s *Virgin* (2004) that tells the story of three Jakarta high school girls with sex in their mind encountering dilemmas from pregnancy to prostitution. The protagonist character in this film, Biyan, runs away from her dysfunctional home to finds refuge with a tolerant uncle. She is a witness (as she writes her observations in her diary) of the predicaments of her friends (Stella and Katy) in metropolitan Jakarta with many bitter experiences in order to survive and pursue their dreams. Another teen movie with similar theme is Nayato Fio Nuala’s controversial film *Ekskul* (Extra-Curricular, 2006).² This film is about a Jakarta high school student (Joshua) who is constantly bullied at school and abused at home. When he gains possession of a gun he takes some of his fellow students hostage at school. In the end he commits suicide by shooting himself as he cannot resolve his problem. Nayato Fio Nuala’s commercially successful film *18+* (Eighteen Plus, 2009) also

² *Ekskul* was awarded the Best Film in the 2006 Indonesian Film Festival (FFI) and prompted a wave of protests from people in film scene due to the issue of copyright breach as stole music score of Korean film *Taegukgi* resulted in revocation of the award. See Chapter 2 for the details of the controversy of Indonesian Film Festival (FFI).

tackles teenage problems in which the main protagonist commits suicide after she discovers that his boyfriend has made her friend pregnant. Nayato was also the film director of *Virgin 2* (2010) that has different characters though still focuses on three female teenage and their predicaments set in the capital Jakarta.



Figure 4.1. Still from Hanny Saputra's *Virgin*
Biyani meets with her close friend Stella at the club as an important place for urban young people to hang out, share and resolve their problems.

It should be noted that most of characters in *Virgin* act in confined (indoor) spaces like shopping mall, club, hotel room, school, and home rather than outdoor spaces like street, park or plaza. As Paramadhita (2011) suggests, post-New Order cinema tends to use an urban space as “a backdrop of young people’s subjectivity in relation to issues that directly affect them, issues that have treated as ‘private’ and ‘domestic’ instead of ‘public’ and ‘national’ (p.507). The “private issue” can be seen clearly in *Virgin* as this film attempts to portray the commodification of “virginity” (*keperawanan*) that is part of the changing of urban life. Issue of virginity is no longer related to moral integrity or female honor as proscribed by social norm in Indonesia, but rather a new commodity that can be exchanged for money; hence, it is a matter of personal choice. In an early scene of *Virgin*, Biyani’s close friend (Stella) exchanges her virginity for money to an old man at the public toilet in the shopping mall, but

unfortunately she has been fooled by him as she did not receive any money. In another crucial scene, Biyan decides to exchange her virginity for a rich man at the luxurious hotel in order to pay her friend's debt to loan shark, but in the end the rich man never take Biyan's virginity as he sympathizes with the Biyan's sacrifice for her friend instead he publish Biyan's diary as a novel. Meanwhile, when Stella is framed for playing in a sex film, she attempts to commit suicide in her bathroom as she has embarrassed her parents.

The interior (closed) spaces as prominent cinematic landscapes in *Virgin*, that shape film characters' acts, are not unique in contemporary Indonesian cinema. Analyzing Nia Dinata's *Arisan!* (The Gathering, 2003) and Cyntia Puspita Rini's short *Matchmaker* (2006), Paramadhita (2011) argues that "[T]he closed spaces of the city are not treated as a source of claustrophobia. Rather, they are sites where problems are confronted; the space limitation is not to be transgressed but to be understood and stretched in order for the characters to articulate their subjectivity" (p.509). However, unlike Paramadhita's argument that the close spaces are "safe social sphere" as they are not associated with "crime, poverty and the blurred boundaries between the have and the have-nots" (2011, p.508), in *Virgin* the closed spaces (such as public toilet in mall, hotel room, film set, bathroom) are a source of trouble for the main characters. For instance, Stella lost her virginity in the public toilet in mall and almost commits suicide at the bathroom after falls a victim of sex film production, while Biyan nearly sells her virginity in the hotel room to pay her friend's debt. In other words, closed space are not a sanctuary, but rather an extension of the urban open (outdoor) space, which has been contaminated by the capitalist consumption as well as affected by larger social (urban) crisis.

Meanwhile, contemporary Malaysian mainstream cinema generally portrays the urban areas as source of demoralization or social pathologies particularly among young

people since various social problems exist in the city like gangsterism, drug abuses, prostitution, and the like. Interestingly, films with an urban dystopia theme are quite popular and even hit box office such as Osman Ali's *Anak Halal* (lit. Legal Child, 2007), Ahmad Idham's *Mat Rempit*³ (Illegal Motorbike Racer, 2006) and Syamsul Yusuf's *Bohsia*⁴, *Jangan Pilih Jalan Hitam* (lit. Sluts, Don't Choose the Wrong Path, 2009). In particular, *Anak Halal* tells the story of an abandoned son of a criminal (Indra Putera) who was raised by a woman living as a squatter. Putera falls in love with a rich girl and drug addict (Amirah Atikah), putting him in conflict with a gang of drug dealers. This film portrays almost realistically the other sides of Kuala Lumpur: dark alleys, squatters, wet market and flats with the famous Petronas Towers in the background. According to film producer Gayatri Su-Lin Pillai, *Anak Halal* incorporates some "social elements" by showing some social ills in order to give an insight of reality in Malaysian society to the audience from various class backgrounds (interview, 21 February 2012). Analyzing the representation of slum in Indian popular films, Ashis Nandy (1998) writes:

[T]he slum may or may not be ugly, it may or may not symbolize absurdity, but always has a story to tell about the state of vitality, creativity and moral dynamism of society that defines the relationship between slum and suburbia. [...] The slum can be read as the past of suburbia or as alternative to or decline from it. It can be romanticized and invested with the vision of desirable society or a lost utopia (p.11).

³ The terms "*Mat Rempit*" (male) and "*Minah Rempit*" (female) refer to people take part of illegal motor racing, riding "underbone" motorbikes (*kapcai*) or scooters on the numerous highways that ring big cities like Kuala Lumpur. According to David Lim, the precursor of *Mat Rempit* and *Minah Rempit* is *Mat Motor* (the biker); hence, *Mat Rempit* is "a wilder variant of *Mat Motor*, regularly prowling the night streets in pairs, packs or swarms" (cited in Stivens, 2012, p.183). Interestingly, while illegal motorbike racing is popular among young Malays, illegal car racing is popular among young Chinese Malaysians since they can afford to buy car and to differentiate themselves from their Malay counterparts.

⁴ "*Boh-sia*" literally means "no sound" ("*boh*" means "no," while "*sia*" means "sound" in Hokkien dialect). However, in an everyday usage the word "*boh-sia*" is a derogatory term to refer to "young female slut" ("easy pick ups"), some as young as 12—hanging out and engaging in "indiscriminate socialising and promiscuity" in certain spots in Kuala Lumpur, particularly behind a road of the Sultan Abdul Samad building (Hisham Harun cited in Stivens, 2012, p.177).

To a certain degree, Nandy's analysis of Indian films above can be applied to *Anak Halal* as we can find some noble values such as friendship, solidarity, sacrifice, and mutual respect still alive among the slum dwellers. In other words, the poor and miserable conditions of the slum do not corrupt the character and morality of the slum dwellers. For instance, Indra Putera (Putera) works as mechanic at a motorbike repair shop and he always entertains his friends by playing guitar and singing along with Johanna (Jo), who helps her mother to sell fruits at the Chow Kit wet market. Putera also helps Amira Atikah (Atikah) when she gets into trouble with her luxurious car. Meanwhile, Erzan, who must pay his family debts and take care of his sister, runs a burger stall although secretly a drug-trafficking syndicate entraps him as he desperately needs money to support his family. The warm and livable atmosphere in the slum area has attracted Atikah, who is a daughter of respectful *Datuk*, when she accidentally visits the area and later she spends her free time and hangs out with Putera's friends with ease.

However, it can be seen clearly in *Anak Halal* there is still a group of people living in squatters in the capital Kuala Lumpur and doing some menial jobs that are still overlooked by the government policy. The film also shows the "irony of modernization" (Abu Bakar, 2010) in which the glittering image of Kuala Lumpur as a metropolitan city cannot hide its underbelly or subterranean world. This irony is symbolically shown in a dramatic scene when Atikah commits suicide under the influence of drugs by jumping from the rooftops with the backdrop of the firecrackers in the sky as part the Malaysia national day celebration. In addition, the ironic tone of *Anak Halal* is evident in the film title. As one film critic commented on the film title, "One of the cleverer things about the film (intended or otherwise) is the very titling of "Anak Halal". It's not difficult to see the wordplay here suggesting an alternate take on the movie's characters. Are they not usually *anak haram* (bad seeds), these poor people who live under bridges and on rooftops, singing songs and keeping late hours? The 'victim-of-circumstance' viewpoint

is very audience-friendly in "Anak Halal", making it an admirable communicative piece outside art house film" (Lee, 2008, para.4).

By the same token, both Ahmad Idham's *Mat Rempit* and Syamsul Yusof's *Bohsia Jangan Pilih Jalan Hitam* depict the illegal motor racing which is popular among Malay under class living in urban areas. The recurrent theme of "*mat rempit*" in Malaysian action genre not only reflects the displacement of Malay working class in cosmopolitan city, but also the portrayal of other sides of Malaysian modernity. Interestingly, film censorship board is less strict on the *mat rempit*-themed films due its popularity among urban Malay young people in particular from lower-middle class families who have been the loyal supporters of UMNO (interview with Amir Muhammad, 7 January 2012). As Stivens notes, "There have been a series of ministry, UMNO youth and UMNO women's branch proposals about ways to try to engage with rempits, such as finding places for them to race, rebranding them with less derogatory name and enlisting them as the "eyes" and "ears" of the Malaysian Police Force" (2012, p.184). Likewise, a *New Straits Times* columnist Zainul Arifin writes, "Why do Mat Rempit[s] exist and what do we do with them? Maybe, rather than outright condemnation, all they need is tough love" (cited in Stivens, 2012, p.184). Not surprisingly, UMNO recruits *mat rempits* into the party for a greater cause and to rename these new members as "*mat cemerlang*" (great achievers). Put it bluntly, Malay youth as *mat rempit* becomes a subject of corrective action of the existing political regime as well as target of political mobilization.

Unlike most mainstream films set in Kuala Lumpur, Effendee Mazlan's and Fariza Azlina Isahak's *Songlap* (2011) offers a complex portrayal of contemporary cosmopolitan Kuala Lumpur⁵ without much sentimentality instead with strong reference

⁵ Unlike common perception of most critics and scholars, Amir Muhammad's documentary *Big Durian* is about Kuala Lumpur rather than the riot caused by the private Adam who ran amok in the Chow Kit district. Perhaps the only exception is a film critic Dennis Lim from the *Village Voice* magazine who calls *Big Durian* as a "love letter to Kuala Lumpur" instead of political documentary. Similarly, other Amir Muhammad's controversial documentary *Lelaki Komunis*

to Malaysian today's politics. Produced by Grand Brilliance (GBSB) and Red Films, *Songlap* costs about RM 7 million with three Malaysian rising stars (Shahezy Sam, Syafie Nawip and Sara Ali) play challenging characters (Ahmad, 2011, p.21). It should be noted that one of film productions of *Songlap*, Red Films (established in 2004), is well known as a film production company dedicated to working with independent filmmakers in Malaysia and the region in developing and producing local and regional stories for the world audience. Since its inception, Red Films supported Malaysian independent filmmakers in producing their early digital works (www.redfilms.com.my). For instance, Red Films have produced most of "new generation" of Malaysian digital filmmakers' works such as Amir Muhammad's *Big Durian* (2003) and *Lelaki Komunis Terakhir* (The Last Communist, 2006), James Lee's *The Beautiful Washing Machine* (2004) and *Bernafas Dalam Lumpur* (Breathing in Mud, 2007), Woo Min Jin's *Monday Morning Glory* (2005), and Ho Yuhang's *Sanctuary* (2004). In fact, Red Films has already produced Effendee and Fariza's directorial debut teen film *KAMI* (Us, 2008). *KAMI* is about a group of teenagers with troubled relationship with their parents and led them to drug abuse. However, *Songlap* is bleaker film than *KAMI* in portraying Kuala Lumpur as an urban landscape imbued with complex social problems.

The story of *Songlap* revolves around the relationship between two brothers (Ad and Am) who are involved in a baby-selling syndicate and also closely connected to a human trafficking network along the Malaysian-Thai border. In this film, after some women delivered their babies for sale, they are forced to be a prostitute and sent to the Malaysian-Thai border. A young woman Hawa, who is entrapped in the baby-selling syndicate and sister of Ad's late friend Razak, is actually impregnated by her own father—this incest subtext is almost impossible to be found along the history of

Terakhir (The Last Communist) is a journey to trace down the trail of Malaysian communist leader Chin Peng during the guerilla war. In an interview, Amir says, "I don't want to interview people like politicians; I just want to interview people to see how the environment produces these particular people. Because, I think, if you want, the subtext of The Last Communist is that a person is always shaped by the time and place he grew up" (Feativalpuntodevista, 2012).

Malaysian cinema. In fact, this incest subtext was inspired by the real case in Austria in which father confined her daughter and made her pregnant (interview with Effendee Mazlan and Fariza Azlina Isahak, 24 January 2012). Although initially Hawa hates and wants to kill her baby, she finally abandons her plan when accidentally Ad arrive in her room. Ad attempts to save her from giving her baby to the syndicate, but he must run from the baby-selling syndicate and Hawa's father. It is interesting to note that the precedence of the story of a baby-selling syndicate can be found in Woo Ming Jin's *The Tiger Factory* (2010). This film is about a 19-years old Ping Ping, who lives under the guardianship of her aunt (Madame Tien) and works in a pig farm and as dishwasher, dreams to go to Japan to work in a car parts factory. She does not know that her aunt runs a clandestine "baby factory" in which immigrant workers from country like Burma are used to impregnate young woman and the babies then sold off. Ping Ping finally knows the truth about her aunt since she desperately needs some money in order to pursue her dream to go Japan.



Figure 4.2. Still from Effendee Mazlan's and Fariza Azlina Isahak's *Songlap*. Ad and his best friend Razak spend their time together at an unfinished and abandoned building with glittering skyscrapers in the backdrop.

Songlap (colloquial term for "corruption") represents the ugly Malaysians regardless their races and shows the grim and gritty pictures of Kuala Lumpur city far from a glitz image promoted by the Malaysian Tourism Board and glamorized by

mainstream Malaysian drama films. For instance, this film subtly captures a flock of ravens in the abandoned buildings in Kuala Lumpur.⁶ The image of abandoned buildings can be found in many parts of Malaysia as a result of unfinished or corrupted project funded by the Malaysian government. Interestingly, an obvious political reference of today's Malaysia can be found the tagline of this film: *kerja kotor, sapu bersih* (dirty works must be cleaned up). The word "*kerja kotor*" ("dirty work") is easily associated with some corruption cases under Najib Razak government, while the word "*bersih*" or "clean" indicatively refers to a civil society movement called "Bersih" which pushes for free and fair election in Malaysia. "Bersih" is a transethnic coalition of 84 non-governmental organizations and activist groups. Although initially "Bersih" started out as a political parties-driven movement in 2005 and launched a campaign on 23 November 2006 in the Malaysian Parliament building lobby, in April 2010 it was renamed as "Bersih 2.0" and transformed into a "fully non-partisan" movement and "free from political influence" under the co-chairperson Datuk Ambiga Srinivasan and Datuk A. Samad Said. It is noteworthy that *Songlap* echoed the spirit of "Bersih 2.0" rally (also called the "Walk for Democracy") on 9 July 2012 in Kuala Lumpur by spreading a clear message to get rid of all corrupt or illegal activities centered in the capital Kuala Lumpur. Not surprisingly, in the end the film Ad and Hawa with her baby take a bus and depart from the metropolitan city to a small town somewhere in Malaysia. Ad, Hawa and her baby represent a hope as they are quite "innocent" in the web of criminal or illegal activities, whereas Am cannot escape from the underworld activities as he has been deeply involved in such illegal activities due to his addiction to gambling. Since Kuala Lumpur is constructed as a violent and corrupt space that has corrupted all

⁶ According to Effendee Mazlan and Fariza Azlina Isahak the flock of ravens is real as can be found in some parts in Kuala Lumpur like in their shooting location (personal interview, 24 January 2014). I thought that the presence of ravens is a technique of filmmakers to dramatize the grittiness of Kuala Lumpur with film noir style. Instead, the filmmakers simply capture the real physical space of Kuala Lumpur even with a documentary filmmaking style.

characters (except Ad and Hawa), it creates uncertainty whether anyone can escape from the violent city.

Despite clearly making a reference to “Bersih,” in one scene of *Songlap* the audience can find a cynicism towards the Najib Razak government’s slogan “1Malaysia” (One Malaysia) when Bang Mat (perpetrator of human trafficking) left the meeting in coffee shop and said “*Salam 1Malaysia*” mimicking the gesture of Najib Razak saying his slogan in many occasions. The parallelism between Bang Mat (criminal) and Najib Razak (politician) who says enthusiastically the same slogan are not simply coincidental, but a form of dark humor of the contemporary Malaysian politics. “1Malaysia” with its slogan “People First, Performance Now” (*Rakyat Didahulukan, Pencapaian Diutamakan*) is designed to “re-orient Malaysia toward a new direction geared towards greater unity and success, which is derived from the idea of the Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Sri Mohd Najib Tun Abdul Razak. The concept of “One Malaysia” implies that the nation is “a family and that despite its differences, at the end of the day what unites us is that we are all Malaysians” (emphasis added). However, precisely the prescribed idea of “family” has been interrogated in *Songlap*. The baby-selling syndicate and group of gamblers become “surrogate families” for Am, while Ad has only relation with his friend Razak who later dies due to drug abuse. In film the idea of family is only a mediated reality as seen by Ad on television. Absence of the father (patriarchal power) can be interpreted as the absence of state in providing some basic social services to all citizens regardless their different religious and ethnic backgrounds.

Constructing urban landscapes where various social problems exist and persist, Indonesian and Malaysian contemporary cinemas not only become an archive of urban space in the two countries but also form power geometries. In a cultural geography perspective, power geometries can be defined as “powerful forces, forces that are themselves continually transformed through unrelenting struggle, whether that struggle

is open rebellion [...] or more mundane, everyday accommodation to ongoing cultural, political and economic change" (Mitchell, 2000). In *Virgin* urban landscape mostly manifests in indoor (closed) spaces where the main characters deal with their private matters (i.e. virginity, jealousy, rivalry, friendship) but the closed spaces is inseparable from the social problems from the outdoor spaces. Meanwhile, in *Anak Halal* and *Songlap* the main characters roam in the outdoors while dealing with broader social problems (drug trafficking, rape, baby selling, human trafficking). Although there are some closed spaces (i.e. clinic, gambling venue, cheap hotel room) in *Songlap*, they are simply a continuation of social problems in the outdoor spaces (i.e. baby selling, illegal gambling, prostitution). Similarly, in *Anak Halal* closed space such as Atikah's bedroom is a place where she takes drugs. It is not by accident that the dominant closed spaces, which are associated with "domesticity" or "feminized space," in *Virgin* due to female protagonist characters in the film, while the main protagonist characters in *Songlap* and *Anak Halal* are males. Interestingly, both in *Virgin* and *Songlap* the powerful capitalistic economy that encompasses many aspects of urban life, has transformed the meaning of personal matters into a commodity for economic exchange. At the same time, the crisis of family institution as manifested in dysfunctional and broken family (divorce, domestic violence, sexual abuse/incest), which has contributed to the troubled youth, surface both in confined (closed) and open urban spaces. However, the urban inhabitants continuously negotiate and struggle against oppressive power in order to create more inhabitable society. While in *Virgin* most characters act in closed spaces of urban area (mall, club, hotel, home) as they deal with some private matters, most characters in *Songlap* act and move in various outdoor spaces (road, bus terminal, border area) and face many social issues such as gangsterism, illegal gambling, baby-selling syndicate, prostitution and human trafficking. Therefore, urban space in *Songlap* is not as a scenic or geographical entity but as political and cultural entity, evolving in the course of time.

Racialized (Ethnicized) Landscape within Plural Society

Unlike “nature,” landscape does not exist independently of human investment towards space. Landscape cannot be understood as “scenes” into which humans are inserted, but rather the products of human activity, shaped through and shaping culture. In other words, the form of landscape corresponds to the form of human experience of it as can be found in many representations of the different personal, cultural and social functions of space. Consequently, landscape can be “racialized” or “ethnicized” as both an outcome of social changes and part of it, especially in the context of plural society. In Indonesia an ethnicized landscape is shaped by the restricted space for ethnic minority groups to participate in the broader social and political field due to forced ethnic assimilationist policy during the New Order era, while an ethnicized landscape in Malaysia is the continuation of colonial racial policy maintained by the current Malay supremacist politics.

Under colonial rule, landscape was partitioned along racial lines in order to sustain racial segregation and maintain colonial authority. After the declaration of independence, national governments in Southeast Asia did not radically change or abandon (in some cases they preserved) former colonial policies and structures regarding race to serve the interest of new political regimes. In this regard, cinema contributes to the anchorage of the landscape in human life and participates in the process of imaginative projection. As J.T.W Mitchell (1994, p.2) argues that the political stage identity formation is influenced by the existence of moving cinematic landscape in contrast to the motionless landscapes of still media. This section discusses the construction of racialized (ethnicized) landscape through cinematic representations within plural societies in contemporary Indonesian and Malaysian cinema. This section suggests that while Malaysian and Indonesian independent filmmakers construct the

racialized landscape through cinematic imageries, they have attempted to transgress the prescribed racialized landscape and created the more plural and egalitarian democratic landscape.

Deepak Kumaran Menon's *Chalanggi* (Dancing Bells, 2007) is a perfect example of how racialized landscape (particularly ethnic Indian) is constructed through cinematic representation. Graduating as part of the inaugural batch (along with Tan Chui Mui and Liew Seng Tat) from the Multimedia University at Cyberjaya majoring in film and animation, Deepak started making some short films such as *Jalan Tun Lee* (Tun Lee Road, 2001) and *Wind Chimes* (2003) before embarking on his first Tamil-language feature-length *Chemman Chaalai* (The Gravel Road, 2005). This film has been deeply inspired by Yasmin Ahmad's *Rabun* (2001) and Satyajit Rai's cinematic style as he wanted to make a film on Indian Malaysian community with its family values, hopes and dreams (personal interview with Deepak Kumaran Menon, 10 February 2012). *Chemman Chaalai* tells the story of a rubber tapper family set in the 1960s in rubber estate in Malaysia and underscores the importance of education for Malaysian Indians to alleviate their economic and social marginalization. In *Chalanggi* he shifts the set of the story to the ethnic Indian's urban living issues such as education, suppression, unemployment, dysfunctional family value and racial segregation that most Indian Malaysians encounter in their daily lives. Contemplating his works, he notes, "A community film of family, hope and dreams, *Chemman Chaalai* and *Chalanggi* are cry that hopefully would create a sense of history, self-discovery and an inspiration to all."

Chalanggi tells the story of little Uma, an eleven-year-old schoolgirl, who wants to take classical Indian dancing (Bharatanatyam) lesson. She is an Indian girl living in Brickfields, the rundown Indian district of the Malaysian capital Kuala Lumpur. Unlike Deepak's first feature *Chemman Chalaai* (The Gravel Road, 2004), which focuses on Malaysian Indians at the rubber plantation in 1960s, *Chalanggi* looks at Indians in

contemporary urban Malaysia. Growing up without her father but only her mother and brother with poor living conditions means Uma's desire to learn Indian dance is difficult. Uma's mother (Muniammah) sells flower garlands to support her family needs, while her brother (Siva), a seventeen-year-old school drop out, works at a car wash station in order to buy his own motorbike but in the end he uses his saving to buy accessories for Uma's dancing lesson. Since separated from her mother, Uma's father only occasionally visits her as he has drinking problem and involves in some petty criminals acts. Uma's family live in a decent and small house with tin rooftop, but their house soon will be demolished for the urban redevelopment, particularly for commercial and business purposes. Since Brickfields is strategically located at the center of Kuala Lumpur, this residential area easily become the main target for the transformation into a business center and highly expensive condominiums or apartments. Indeed, poor people like Uma's family become potentially displaced people like other Indians living as squatters in Selangor state who had been resettled in the cheap-high-rise flats in 1990s with concentrated poverty, cramped living conditions and lack of recreational facilities that gradually turned into "high-rise slums" (Nagarajan, 2009, p.386).

The neighborhood, where Uma lives with her family, is predominantly Indian residents (commonly called "Little India" in Kuala Lumpur) while only a few Chinese people run their business in this area. Demographically, Indians make up eight percent of the total Malaysian population while about 30 percent live in the urban areas. Historically, ethnic Indians lived in the rubber plantation during British colonial period and since 1970s they migrated to urban areas due to the expansion and diversification of crops (particularly oil palm) by plantation companies. Unfortunately, most Indians lived as squatters as they were largely in low-paid itinerant employment. In addition, the state institutions never intervened for over two decades despite awareness of the plight of Indians who have been uprooted from the rubber plantation (Nagarajan, 2009, p.381).

During the aggressive implementation of the New Economic Policy (NEP) with quotas favoring Malays since 1970s, urban Indian labors who traditionally worked in the industrial manual group of government service found it difficult to gain employment in this sector while the Indians share in skilled and professional employment declined (Nagarajan, 2009, p.372). Although there is no explanation of the social background of Uma's mother, this film shows the social and economic hardship experienced by Uma's family. Not surprisingly, unlike conventional drama film, most of Indian characters in this film move in open (outdoor) spaces as they have to do hard work in order to survive in the harsh urban life. Only few scenes take place in a closed space. For instance, when Uma's family members have intimate conversations during dinner at their small living room where most activities of Uma's family members take place.

There is only one Chinese character in *Chalanggi* who is an owner of bike shop and a Malay character (played by independent filmmaker Amir Muhammad) as a government officer from Putrajaya whose gleaming Mercedes Benz temporarily parks at the car wash where Siva works. When Shiva asks the official whether he has ever been to Brickfields, he responds that he has been to KL Sentral which is in fact located on the opposite end of Brickfields. This might signify that the Malay officer is simply ignorant or perhaps he never pays any attention to the Indian people condition. According to film scholar and critic Hassan Abd Muthalib (2012) the absence of Malays in Indian film like in Santosh Kesavan's *Aandal* (Prostitute, 2005) signifies their lack of interest in Indian problems. Meanwhile, in one particular scene Chinese character in this film who repairs Uma's bicycle sings a Chinese song: "I am devoted to you, I am sincere, but where are you?" Muthalib (2012) interprets this scene as a filmmaker's comment on "the apathy of the ruling elites (in particular, the Malays) who have not tried to understand the problem faced by the other races" (p.25). This also can be understood as an attempt by the filmmaker to make visible and audible poor Indian people who are ironically

“invisible” in the center of Kuala Lumpur (particularly for the government policy makers) except for the perpetuated negative images as portrayed in the mainstream media in Malaysia.

Meanwhile, the appearance of sympathetic Chinese character in *Chalanggai* reminds us of the similar character (Chinese woman tailor named Atchi) in Menon’s previous film *Chemman Chalaai* who provides the Indian protagonist (Shanta) a job and gives her a dress and bonus when Shanta quits her job to continue her study. The woman tailor only says, “Study well” to Shanta as she already knows that Shanta’s life will be different than her and people in the rubber plantation. It seems that the intention of filmmaker is to portray Chinese characters along with Indian characters to highlight the presence of different ethnic groups in seemingly “racialized” space like the rubber plantation and Brickfields. Moreover, *Chalanggai* has another Malay character as an Indian dance guru (played by Malaysian national icon Ramli Ibrahim) to whom Uma finally learn Baratanatyam (classical Indian dance). Like the Chinese characters in Deepak’s films, the sympathetic dance teacher is a good exemplar of Malay who understands the Indian people because he attempts to know their culture first through dance.

Although we easily see bleak images of the Indian community in racialized urban space (particularly Brickfields) such as unemployment, education suppression, school drop outs, alcoholism, juvenile delinquency, we can also see clearly the harmonious relationship between Indian and Chinese in the Indian populated neighborhood, kampong spirit and value sacrifice for family. Living in urban congested neighborhood does not make Uma’s family lose their traditional values despite their vulnerable position as minority group and poor (subaltern class) in an urban area. As a film critic and scholar Hassan Abd Muthalib writes, “Uma’s neighbourhood is akin to a

traditional village where everybody knows each other and asks about each other's family whenever they meet" (Muthalib, 2007a, p.30).

Another clear form of racialized (ethnicized) landscape in Malaysia can be found in Tan Chui Mui's *Love Conquers All* (2006) set in the fringes of capital Kuala Lumpur. The theme of Malaysian landscapes (more than a backdrop of narrative have appeared in some of Mui's short films such as *Hometown* (2003), *A Tree in Tanjung Malim* (2004) and *South of South* (2005). Tan Chui Mui is one of a small handful of female film directors in the Malaysian independent movement. She has been actively involved in independent film production working as a producer, scriptwriter, editor and occasionally, actress, besides directing her own films and television programs. With Amir Muhammad, James Lee and Liew Seng Tat, she established Da Huang Pictures in 2004—a film collective based in Kuala Lumpur with the aim of making film as the director envisions. Beginning her career as columnist for local newspapers and magazines, she graduated in film and animation from the Multimedia University in Cyberjaya where she tutored. Her first feature *Love Conquers All* is a good outcome of supportive nature of indie filmmakers in Malaysia: produced by Amir Muhammad, edited by Ho Yuhang, with James Lee as director of photography. Not surprisingly, as this film brought together strong creative talents of Malaysian indie filmmakers, it screened at the 19th Tokyo International Film Festival and 11th Busan International Film Festival where it won two major awards, claiming FIPRESCI (a prized awarded by international film critics) and the New Currents Award for Best New Asian Filmmaker of the Year. This film made with assistance of script development grant (10,000 euro) from the Hubert Bals Fund of Rotterdam.

The story of *Love Conquers All* revolves around the emotional coming-of-age journey of a young woman (Ah Peng) from Penang who comes to the fringes of Kuala Lumpur to stay with her hawker-stall-running-aunt. She shares a room with her auntie's

daughter (little Mei) and gets along with her very well. Ah Peng still regularly contacts her boyfriend in Penang from a public phone, but she attracts the attention of John, a pimp who shamelessly listens in to her conversation. The relationship develops between Ah Peng and John but ends up in a tragic situation, meanwhile Mei has a mysterious pen pal who is never revealed. While this film shows a familial as well as romantic relationship for the female protagonist, it also depicts the fragility of innocent love of young woman since her feeling can be manipulated easily by a bad man for his own advantage by entrapping her to be prostitute. Therefore, contrary to the film title ("love conquers all"), the film shows the cruel side of love, particularly for young innocent girl from the small town.

The landscape of this film is one of back alleys in a small town. Typically there are many shophouses of the kind built by Chinese immigrants which become a testimony to their presence (Muthalib, 2007a, p.33). However, Ah Peng stays at one of the modern terrace houses where many Malaysian (but mostly middle class Chinese Malaysians) have relocated. Unlike houses in typical Malay kampong, this house has a gate that is always locked in order to protect the residents from any intruders. Ah Peng sometimes wanders around at the night market to get a cheap product or just simply do window shopping to spend her free time, particularly when she gets bored. Although night markets seem to be a lively place where buyers bargain with the sellers excitedly, Ah Peng looks lonely and alienated from the vibrant atmosphere of her surrounding. Her mind and feelings are still not quite settled in Kuala Lumpur since she is a newcomer in this city and separated from her boyfriend in Penang. Nevertheless, the night market is an ethnicized space as the Chinese predominantly are both sellers and buyers and they talk in dialects rather than in *Bahasa Malaysia*.

It is interesting to note that the ethnicized landscape in this film also can be found in a seaside kampong where most Malay Muslims live. When Ah Peng and John travel

out of Kuala Lumpur and arrive at a seaside kampong, John stops and calls out at the front a one house with an Islamic greeting “*Assalamu’alaikum*” (Peace Upon You). Unfortunately, during the public screening in the movie theater that greeting became a “beep” sound due to film censorship. Film scholar Benjamin McKay comments such censorship is “remarkably callous and bizarre—but more outrageous, considering that greeting is an equivalent of ‘Hello’ or ‘*Apa khabar*’” (McKay, 2011, p.198). In the view of film censorship board, Malaysian film cannot show a non-Muslim (Chinese) greeting his fellow Muslim countryman using Islamic greeting although Malaysia is multiethnic society. In addition, a seaside kampong as Malay Muslim territory is perceived by film censor as an exclusive (ethnicized) space and should be protected from the “contamination” of non-Muslims. Interestingly, one of residents of the seaside kampong invites both Ah Peng and John for lunch, as the resident knows that both of them look so hungry and tired after they had a long trip from Kuala Lumpur.

Meanwhile, most racialized space in Indonesian cinema is related to the ethnic Chinese rather than other ethnic groups such Indians or Arabs though they also can be found in some ethnic enclaves within Indonesian society. Although in the Steven Facius Winata’s *CINtA* has been discussed extensively in previous chapter with relation to the issue of racial and religious pluralism, it is also relevant to be further explored in terms of racialized space. This is because not many Indonesian films are set in the contemporary Chinese community area (*pecinan* in Indonesian). Of course, some films with Chinese protagonist such as Nia Dinata’s *Cau Bu Kan* (A Courtesan, 2002) and Riri Riza’s *Gie* (2005) have a setting in Chinese community area, but the set is during the colonial period and the 1960s, respectively. As Winata (2009) wrote in his film production journal, the initial location of *CINtA* was the old Chinese business district in Jakarta (Pasar Baru) but then moved to *pecinan* area in the downtown of Jakarta. Further he wrote the reasons in opting *pecinan* area for his film set:

The location is full of magic and rich with culture and tradition. Such contradiction and wounds scatter everywhere. We found an alley where houses are wholly protected with barbwire and ticked metal window trellis. What happened in these houses in the past? What kind of trauma has shaped this society? Then we found a house with historical sentimentality of the past. We decided this is the house for A Su [the protagonist in *CINtA*]⁷

With these location characteristics, Winata constructs the ethnicized landscape in his film by focusing on A Su's family. For instance, the interior of A Su's house is full of *chinoiserie*, heightening his family's house located in a Chinatown district, where they have an ancestral altar in the house, complete with red lanterns and joss sticks burning. While the depiction of A Su's house and his milieu inevitably tends to be stereotyping, if not essentializing, Chinese cultural identity, but this can be interpreted as an attempt to reassert the Chinese identity that more than 32 years has been suppressed under the Suharto's authoritarian regime.

Moreover, as pointed out by the filmmaker in his journal, the selection of film location are also based on the traces of "trauma" and "wounds" in the Chinese community area. In this film we can see A Su's house surrounded by high metal fence and the gate door is always locked. Rather than showing A Su's family as asocial, this gated house signals the trauma of A Su's family (especially his father) of the May riots in 1998 in which A Su's sister became a victim of rape causing his mother death. Since ethnic Chinese live in a certain area, they become an easy and obvious target of racial violence like what happened in May 1998. Therefore, the closed (indoor) space of A Su's house is the safest place for A Su's father as he is rarely seen doing activity outdoors and interacting with his neighbors except selling noodles at the food stall. Since only A Su and his father stay at their big house and they rarely communicate to each other, the atmosphere in the house is quiet and empty. A Su's father is still in mourning since his

⁷ Sebuah lokasi yang penuh keajaiban dan kekayaan tradisi serta budaya. Kontradiksi dan bekas luka terhampar dimana-mana. Kita menemukan sebuah gang dengan rumah yang hampir seluruhnya ditutup dengan teralis besi tebal dan kawat berduri. Apa yang terjadi di tempat ini di masa lalu? Trauma seperti apa yang membentuk lingkungan masyarakat seperti ini? Kemudian sebuah rumah yang penuh dengan emosi historis tentang masa lalu. Kami memutuskan kalau rumah inilah yang akan menjadi rumah A Su.

since his wife death many years ago as he keeps cleaning his wife photo frame, while A Su hardly believes why his father still cannot get rid himself of the traumatic memory from the past.

Like most ethnic Chinese community area in Indonesia, it is not so difficult to find out market located close to the residential area. In the first sequence of this film, the camera captures the wet market where sellers and buyers are predominantly ethnic Chinese. It seems that *CINtA* highlights the image of ethnic Chinese as confined in their economic activities to urban areas. For instance, there is one scene showing A Su and his local assistant chopping pork meat and preparing pork fried rice although it does not show the customers. A Su asked sincerely to his Muslim assistant why pork is forbidden in Islam since he started learning Islam from some books. This is understandable since Chinese Indonesians had long been identified as “economic animal” but “politically marginal” (Thung, 2012). In contrast, there is no representation of economic activity of Siti’s family, for instance, her mother is depicted cleaning up a cookie jar in the living room while no depiction of her father activity. In film the activity of Siti’s family is centered on the living room (closed space), especially when her family accepted the marriage proposal from one Muslim family. The contrast image of A Su and Siti is inseparable from the status of Chinese Indonesians as “ethnic strangers,” who have very restricted space to participate in broader social arena and potentially become a target of discrimination, in contrast to indigenous Indonesians (*pribumi*) as “ethnic citizens” (Thung, 2012). Hence, urban space is seemingly the “natural” residence for Chinese in Indonesia as it provides them vast opportunities to participate in economic activities.

Indeed, there are many parallelisms between *CINtA* and *Love Conquers All* in representing a racialized landscape. First, characters in those two films are involved in economic activities as they work as a food seller (fried rice and noodles). Moreover, the space for work sometimes blurs with space for personal or family activities. For instance,

in *Love Conquers All*, little Mei studies after school and does her homework helped by Ah Peng at Mei's mother food stall instead of at home. Work takes almost their whole time in order to survive as minority group that confines them in the working space. Not surprisingly, the ethnic Chinese characters in *CINtA* and *Love Conquers All* stay close to the market or center of economic activity such as the wet market and night market in the urban area. Second, ethnic Chinese characters stay in the gated house with locked gate to keep out intruders and protect their property. However, in *CINtA* the gated house with steel window trellis echoes the traumatic experience of the May riots in 1998, while in *Love Conquers All* it reflects more an attempt to protect invaluable properties. Hence, home in *CINtA* is a safe place although the traumatic memory still lingers as manifested in some photographs hanging on the wall. In *CINtA* the elements of "Chinese culture" as reflected in the interior of A Su's house are visually quite striking, while in *Love Conquers All* those elements are less visible. This may reflect the "renaissance" of Chinese culture in Indonesia since the 1998 *Reformasi* which was suppressed for over 32 years under the New Order regime due to forced assimilationist policy upon ethnic Chinese to adopt so-called "Indonesian culture."

Chinese characters (A Su and his father) in *CINtA* speak national language (*Bahasa Indonesia*) to each other instead of Chinese dialect. In contrast, all Chinese characters (Ah Peng, Mei, Mei's mother, John) in *Love Conquers All* speak in Chinese (Cantonese and Mandarin) to each other except when they speak to other ethnic groups. Although the female protagonist (Ah Peng) in *Love Conquers All* looks lonely and alienated, she moves freely from one place to another without fear or traumatic experience. Since in *CINtA* there are two main protagonists from different racial and religious backgrounds, the interracial relationship becomes the central narrative, which is in a troubled situation due to the traumatic event in the past. Meanwhile, we only find out minor interracial relationship in *Love Conquers All*, particularly when Ah Peng and

John visit a seaside kampong in the East Coast area where one of the residents welcomes them warmly.

It is clear that racialized space has shaped the way inhabitants deal with their life particularly their marginal position in the larger society. For Indian Malaysians, racialized landscape is a location where they maintain their livelihood in order to survive within an allocated space and they should deal with the continuing threat of displacement due to aggressive urban development process in the capital city. Likewise, both ethnic Chinese in Indonesia and Malaysia find a way to survive and continue their life (sometimes after traumatic racial riots or discrimination). However, through cinematic representations both Indonesian and Malaysian indie filmmakers do not construct an exclusive racialized landscape (as prescribed by the government of both countries) since there is always space for interracial encounters. In particular, interracial relationships in *Chalanggai* reflects the “trans-ethnic” solidarity concerning their position as minority group in Malaysia. Unlike interracial relationship in *Chalanggai*, the relationship in *CINtA* is limited between local/indigenous Muslim (*pribumi*) and Chinese (*non-pribumi*) rather than between Chinese and other ethnic minority groups (Indians or Arabs). The relationship between ethnic Chinese and *pribumi* Muslim in *CINtA* manifests in troubled romantic relationship between A Su and Siti and working (“professional”) relationship between A Su and a *pribumi* worker at his food stall. A Su’s neighborhood as an ethnicized landscape is completely separated from Siti’s *pribumi* neighborhood and only connected by a narrow alley. There is no trans-ethnic solidarity among ethnic minority groups in *CINtA*, although we can find both affective and economic relationship between Chinese and *pribumi*. In *Chalanggai* interracial relationship (between Uma and the Chinese bike shop owner) are mainly shaped by the confined ethnic landscape and the impulse of survivalism within ethnic minority groups. In addition, the interracial relationship emerges when the Chinese characters (Ah Peng and

John) go out from their ethnicized landscape to meet the member of ethnic Malay (inhabitant of a seaside kampong) of other ethnicized landscape.

The Reverberation of “Regionalism”: Decentering National Narrative

While the capital city still occupies the center of cinematic imaginary in most Indonesian and Malaysian films, there is a reverberation of regionalism theme in cinema that constantly decenters the narrative of the capital city into remote area far from the center of the film industry. Moreover, the *Reformasi* movement, which has raised local pride and the spirit of regional autonomy both politically and economically, witnessed the interest toward local culture and community in peripheral areas. However, since film infrastructure and industries are almost non-existent outside the capital city of Jakarta and Kuala Lumpur, most cinematic representations of the remote areas in two countries are constructed by the filmmakers who live and work in the capital city. Interestingly, in the Indonesian context, some filmmakers invited the local people to get involved in the film production both as local assistance and actors. The local not only becomes the main setting of film, but, most importantly, it has been transformed into a film landscape. According to Lefebvre, film landscape is “a spatial *predicate* distinct from ‘setting’ or ‘territory’ (2006, p.xviii). For Lefebvre, “setting” is a location for unfolding action, while “territory” is a lived space that we possess or would like to possess. In this section I follow Lefebvre’s concept of film landscape as “a space of aesthetics contemplation and spectacle.” In addition, landscape as manifested in the spirit of regionalism in Indonesia and Malaysia is also a source of collective (local) identity invested with memory and tradition. This section explores peripheral spaces in contemporary Indonesian and Malaysian cinema where main characters live in different cinematic landscapes carrying different cultural functions. While children occupy the peripheral landscape in

Indonesian cinema embodying hope and future, the adult (elders) inhabit the peripheral landscape in Malaysian cinema embodying tradition and cultural heritage.

In the Indonesian context, the precedence of regionalism can be found in some early films of the internationally acclaimed director Garin Nugroho. In *Surat Untuk Bidadari* (Letter to an Angel, 1994) and *Aku Ingin Menciummu Sekali Saja* (Bird Man Tale, 2002), Nugroho tells the stories of people from the remote areas in Indonesia and evoked some local issues although in fictional narratives.⁸ Other more recent films depict many remote areas located outside the Java Island such as: Papua in John De Rantau's *Denias, Senandung di Awan* (Denias, Singing on the Cloud, 2006), Belitong in Riri Riza's *Laskar Pelangi* (The Rainbow Troops, 2008), West Timor in Ari Sihasale's *Tanah Air Beta* (My Homeland, 2010). Both De Rantau's and Riza's films portray the struggle of children in the remote areas to get a better education, whereas Sihasale's film explores the experience of children living in the borderland after the independence of Timor Leste from Indonesia. Riri Riza's *Laskar Pelangi*, that hit box office in 2008, portrays the poor children living nearby the lucrative tin mine located in Belitong in Sumatera in the mid 1970s. While in *Laskar Pelangi* the children enroll in a weather-beaten school with very limited resources, they are very enthusiastic to study in school and learn from the nature. Regarding his vision in filmmaking, Riri Riza says, "I basically see myself as a storyteller. I tell stories, and it's all about me and the people around me, my culture. I really think my vision is about seeing the rapid change within the society I live in. I love my country, and I live with the many differences and problems that are happening now. The stories that I'm interested in usually deal with these issues" (Coppens, 2006, p. 113).

⁸ Supported by a group of young film directors (i.e. Riri Riza, Mira Lesmana, Nan Triveni Achnas), Garin Nugroho produced educational television series *Anak Seribu Pulau* (Children of a Thousand Islands, 1996), which introduced children from different parts of Indonesia with their unique cultures. Not surprisingly, the figure of children appeared in most of Garin's films such as *Surat Untuk Bidadari* (Letter to an Angel, 1993), *Daun di Atas Bantal* (Leaf on a Pillow, 1998), *Aku Ingin Mencium Sekali Saja* (The Birdman Tale, 2002), *Rindu Kami Padamu* (Of Love and Eggs, 2004) as a medium for articulating various issues in Indonesian such as national identity, ethnicity, cultural diversity, marginalization, and religion. For more detailed analysis of the representation of children in Garin Nugroho's films, see Wibawa (2009).

Similarly, selected as the official Indonesian entry to the 80th Academy Awards in 2008 in the Best Foreign Language Film category, *Denias Senandung di Awan* depicts the most eastern part of Indonesia (Papua). Although people in Papua are still living close to nature and dealing with basic life, the protagonist Denias dreams of attending school in the hope of a brighter future by travelling across fields, rivers, and mountains to get the nearest school. In this film nature becomes a source of knowledge and wisdom for Denias and it does not prevent him to pursue his dream.

The first Indonesian film dealing with the life of people living in the sea (offshore) area is *Jermal* (Fishing Platform, 2009) directed by three film directors Ravi Bharwani, Rayya Makarim and Utawa Tresno. Funded by Global Film Initiative and Hubert Bals Fund and produced by Indonesian film company Ecco Films, this film premiered at the Pusan International Film Festival in 2008 and was commercially released in Indonesia on 12 March 2009. *Jermal* is an isolated fishing platform in the middle of the Malacca Straits off North Sumatera. The central character in the story is Jaya, a 12-year-old schoolboy whose orderly life is dramatically disrupted when, after his mother's death, he is sent to a *jermal* to be with his father (Johar). Johar, a solitary character, is an escapee from the mainland with a past he is determined to reject. Snubbed by his father, Jaya is left to fend for himself in a tough new environment that transforms him from a naive schoolboy into a hardened survivor. Explaining the idea of the making of *Jermal*, the film directors say:

This is a film that tries to capture the pain and struggle of people trying to be accepted. Using a simple story line I [*sic*] wanted to express the minute details in the feelings of the individuals undergoing certain kind of experiences: loneliness, the struggle to sacrifice, pride, honour and dignity, nibbling with joy at the tiny crumbs of what little attention or affection the other has to offer, experiencing rejection, jealousy, prejudice, guilt, shame and hate. At its roots, this is a story of survival and the need to be acknowledged and accepted by the other ("Director's statement," n.d.).

Although this film directors' statement only refer to the struggle of marginal people to be acknowledged by the mainstream society, the film clearly shows the milieu, where those marginal people live, shapes and affects their life.



Figure 4.3. Still from Ravi Bharwani's, Rayya Makarim's and Utawa Tresno's *Jermal*. Children lift up the fishing nets supervised by Pak Johar (Jaya's father).

In this film *jermal* becomes a place of escape or sanctuary for people who have something to avoid on the mainland. On the platform are many children who have run away from their family as well as those with mentally disabilities. For instance, Johar escapes to *jermal* because he killed a man who had an affair with his wife. Since children are uprooted from their family, they create a new familial bond among them in *jermal*. Put another way, *Jermal* epitomizes the marginalization and the conditions of Indonesian children, particularly those who are from the poor families and been left out by mainstream society. While in the end of story Jaya and his father (Johar) decide to leave *jermal* and set for land, they will face the bitter truth that the police will arrest Johar and Jaya will lost his father.

Taking the similar theme of people living in the sea, Kamila Andini's directorial debut *Mirror Never Lies* (Indonesian title *Laut Bercermin*, 2011) portrays the ethnic group living in Kampung Bajo, a fishing village located in the Wakatobi Sea of East Sulawesi. Bajo tribe is commonly known as "Sea Gypsies" as they retain the nomadic nature by

building huts on stilts over water in the middle of the sea; hence, they can freely move anytime. Unlike most Indonesian mainstream films, *Mirror Never Lies* provides an alternative view of Indonesia by portraying the maritime area despite the seas constituting most parts of the country. As Andini writes in a director note, "For my feature film debut, I would like to show the sea world of Indonesia to the world and I would like to take everyone to know Indonesian maritime life a bit closer. I also pondered on other ideas that are part of the weave of the film, like nature loss and alienation that exists in both the individual and society" (Southeast East Asian Film Festival Catalogue, 2012). Funded by the local government (*kabupaten*) of Wakatobi and World Wild Fund (WWF) Indonesia, *Mirror Never Lies* has travelled in various international film festivals and received many awards. Alongside some famous Indonesian actors (i.e. Reza Rahadian and Atiqah Hasiholan), most local Bajonese people involved as non-professional actors in the film project. This makes the film seems to be authentic with documentary value as the film filled with images of many rituals in Bajo community and stunning underwater panorama. The local government as one of source of funding for film production, which promotes local culture and people, is new phenomenon in Indonesian film scene since the *Reformasi*. Only few films funded by local governments such as Hanung Bramantyo's and Iqbal Rais's *Para Pemburu Angin* (Wind Chasers, 2011) and Hanung Bramantyo's *Gending Sriwijaya* (Sriwijaya Ensemble, 2013), which were financially supported by South Sumatera province.

The story of *Mirror Never Lies* focuses on 12-year-old Pakis from Kampung Bajo who seeks her missing father at the sea. She recalls an old Bajo belief about mirrors and water, and tries in vain to spot the reflection of her father in a mirror he gave her. Meanwhile, changes are happening in the village, as the sea tides and sea storms become unpredictable and dangerous. In reality, the existence of Bajo people in Wakatobi is threatened as the coral triangle in that area is being damaged by destructive fishing and

climate change. In Indonesia the reef area is 51,020 square kilometers (17% of the world's total reef areas) in which 82% of it is at risk due to the continuation of blast fishing along with cyanide fishing. While Pakis desperately waits for her father, the arrival of a Jakarta marine scientist (Tudo), who visits the Island to monitor dolphins, creates complex feelings of resentment, curiosity and desire in both Pakis and her mother (Tayung). However, unlike Indonesian mainstream films *Mirror Never Lies* does not construct the outsider (Tudo) as a hero that saves the local people, but rather simply locate him as part of the narrative motif and hence the Tudo character is rather underdeveloped character in the film. Although occasionally Tudo teaches students at the small school in order to engage with Bajo community, he is still foreigner and alienated since he only speaks in national language (*Bahasa Indonesia*) instead of local language.

It is worth noting that for Bajonese People, the sea is part of their root and shapes their collective identity. At the same time, they also aware of the danger of the sea which may threaten their life just like what happened with Pakis's father. While Pakis is still optimistic that her father will return from the sea, Tayung (Pakis' mother) tends to be realistic that there is no hope that her husband will come back. As she tells to Pakis, "The sea is cruel and anything could've happen to your father" (*Laut itu kejam Pakis, apa pun bisa terjadi sama bapakmu*). In contrast, Pakis views the sea as a source of knowledge and as an object of contemplation. After quarreling with her mother, Pakis throws the mirror to the bottom of the sea: "Waves come and go. Every wave, that comes and goes, will bring new things. Waves come and go. Go with the boat and come home bringing fishes. Go with the fish and come home bringing rice and salt. Waves go and never come back with the same thing."⁹ By the end of the film, Pakis reflects the meaning of sea, "The sea is my father's house, everything about the sea is my future. So this is where I want to

⁹ *Ombak datang dan pergi. Setiap gelombang apa pun ia pergi dan membawa sesuatu yang baru. Ombak datang dan pergi. Pergi dengan perahu, pulang membawa ikan-ikan. Pergi dengan ikan, pulang membawa beras dan garam. Ombak pergi dan tidak pernah pulang dengan sesuatu yang sama.*

live with my father's stories. Blue.. broad.. alive. The sea is my big mirror."¹⁰ Here the sea encourages a rupture with ordinary and mundane experiences in the mainland in favor of more spiritual quest. Not surprisingly, for Pakis the sea is like a mirror that reflects the truth including the painful truth. Upon arriving at home she discovers her mother with Tudo in the bedroom then she shouts, "The mirror never lies! Unlike you Mum!" (*Cermin tak bisa bohong! Tidak seperti ibu!*).



Figure 4.4. Still from Kamila Andini's *Mirror Never Lies*. Pakis and her friend Tudo are floating under the water.

It should be noted that both *Jermal* and *Mirror Never Lies* put back the remote places on the Indonesian map, but also highlight the importance of "water" part of Indonesia as archipelagic (maritime) country (about 2,915,000 square kilometers of marine area) that ironically has been neglected by Indonesian government and it has lagged behind the land-based development particularly in Java Island. Both films also make children as central characters in the story. Both also come from unhappy families due to the economic hardship or accidents. The absence of a father figure in *Mirror Never*

¹⁰ *Laut adalah rumah bapakku, semua tentangnya adalah masa depanku. Maka di dinilah aku akan hidup dengan dongeng bapakku. Biru.. Luas.. Hidup. Laut cermin besarku.*

Lies allows the film director, Kamila Andini, to explore the main female characters in a subtle way and express her concern of the damaged coral reefs and the future of community that rely on that sea world. Although one film critic commented on the psychological journey of the female protagonist (Pakis) as “a projection of the director's own ambition to break away from her father's artistic influence and swim alone” (Lee, 2011, para. 6), Pakis’ journey can be understood metaphorically as the resilience of the female characters in coping with many difficulties due to the natural challenges. At the same time, Pakis’ father is a source of knowledge and wisdom (through his storytelling) which Pakis follows obediently (i.e. do not catch and eat small (young) fish). In contrast, the absence of the mother yet the presence of an abusive father in *Jermal* makes the children reliant on the camaraderie spirit among them as child labor at the fishing platform. Living isolated from the normal society, children in *Jermal* not only developed their resilience and strong character, but also created an “alternative” community based on the similar fate and conditions.

Meanwhile, in the past three years, both Malaysian independent and commercial films deliberately deal with Kelantanese culture and landscape such as *Wayang* (Shadow Puppets, dir. Hatta Azad Khan, 2008), *Budak Kelantan* (Kelantanese Boys, dir. Wan Azli Wan Jusoh, 2008), and recently *Bunohan* (Return to the Murder, dir. Dain Iskandar Said, 2011). Moreover, the independent filmmaker Khoo Eng Yow also made a documentary on *tok dalang* (shadow-puppet master) in Kelantan in *Wayang Rindukan Bayang* (World Without Shadow, 2011). Interestingly, two films (*Wayang* and *Wayang Rindukan Bayang*) focus on *wayang* as popular performance art before the ruling party in Kelantan (PAS) tightly controlled it. Meanwhile, two other films (*Budak Kelantan* and *Bunohan*) deal with some violent and criminal actions done by Kelantanese people set in Kuala Lumpur and the Thai-Malaysian border. However, in an indirect way *Bunohan* tells the story of shadow puppeteer Pok Eng and his family in midst of violent conflicts. Of course, there

was precedence in Malaysian cinema in which *wayang* was used as a metaphor of characters in films such as *Perempuan Melayu Terakhir* (The Last Malay Woman, dir. Erma Fatima, 2009) and *Johnny Bikin Filem* (Johnny Makes a Film, dir. Anuar Noor Arai, 2008) (Muthalib, 2008).

Wayang portrays the tension between Islamic-oriented culture and adat-oriented culture focusing on the life of a *tok dalang* (shadow-puppet master), Awang Lah, and his family who face the gloomy fate of *wayang* performance in the State of Kelantan. This film received critical review as one online reviewer writes *Wayang* “goes beyond the clichés in most local films, offering the audiences good content that values Malay heritage and relationships. The film is loaded with strong messages and a good emotional angle that touches your heart” (Wahiduzzaman, n.d.). Similarly, film critic Hassan Abd Muthalib praises *Wayang* because “[t]hrough *Wayang*, Hatta Azad Khan invites us to reflect upon ourselves. To the layman (those not involved in the arts), Hatta portrayed the world of those who live the arts, becoming their obsession. To the artists, they should hold strong. To the students in the traditional arts field, they are invited to return to their roots” (as cited in Jermadi, 2008). In an interview, Hatta explained his motive in producing *Wayang*, “As a filmmaker, I have the social responsibility to encourage our audience to appreciate and to support our own movies, especially those with art, heritage or historical elements. It's a big waste for us not to honour our own movies. It's also good to try something different every once in a while – you don't want the same thing for lunch every day, do you? Same goes for “Wayang”. If the audience allow themselves to enjoy the movie, they will get a different experience; and it will definitely be a pleasurable experience” (Wahiduzzaman, 2008, para. 5). In particular, Hatta’s love for *wayang kulit* is inseparable from his early childhood. In an interview he admitted, “I was brought up in the surrounding of the boisterous traditional performing

arts - *wayang kulit*¹¹, *makyong*¹² and *dikir barat*¹³. Those memories and experiences had inspired me to produce a movie that explores the beauty of these arts and the people that surround them" (Wahiduzzaman, 2008, para.6). After being nominated for 11 awards at the 21st Malaysian Film Festival (FFM) in 2008, *Wayang* received 6 awards for the best film, the best film director, the best actor, the best male supporting actor, the best female supporting actor and received a special jury award for promoting cultural heritage through film. In addition, it received a Jury Merit Award at the Kuala Lumpur International Film Festival in 2008 and was nominated for Best Cinematography at the Gold Panda Award in Chengdu, China in 2010.

In *Wayang* the main protagonist Awang Lah deals with the regeneration crisis of shadow puppeteer since his son is more interested in studying Islam rather than inheriting his father's knowledge and skills in *wayang* performance. The puritan Muslim group is represented by Jusoh character that condemns Awang Lah's *wayang*

¹¹ *Wayang kulit* (shadow puppetry) is a performance set with the light source originates from behind the screen between which there are moving objects (*patung wayang*) that block the light. The *dalang* (puppet master or puppeteer) is the main narrator of the Ramayana epic and accompanied by the gamelan orchestra in *wayang kulit* performance. The character of Pak Dogol or the "clown god" is a man vested with authority over the rural population local authorities and characterized by a baldhead, high-bridged, long nose and dark skin. Local authorities in Kelantan perceive *wayang kulit* is a form of pre-Islamic art and might lead to the worship of entities besides Allah (*syirik* or blasphemy).

¹² *Mak Yong* is "a form of Malay drama that is associated with the cultural zone of the former Pattani Sultanate that spans the southern Thai provinces of Yala, Narathiwat, and Pattani, and the northern Malaysian states of Kalantan, Terengganu and Kedah" (Hardwick, 2013, p.77). The performers of *Mak Yong* are predominantly women playing both female and male characters. In Kalantan, *Mak Yong* usually incorporates the elastic genre "*main teri* or *main puteri*," a ritual healing performance to treat spiritual and social diseases that are unresponsive to modern Western medicine. Due to the presumably pre-Islamic (non-Islamic) practices in *Mak Yong* and the role of females in the ritual, the local authorities in Kalantan banned *Mak Yong* in 1991. See, Hardwick (2013) for an insightful analysis of the complex negotiation process of the *Mak Yong* performers' personal piety and the normative piety widespread in Kelantan society.

¹³ *Dikir barat* is a musical form in Malay Peninsula that involves singing in groups sometimes in a competitive setting and is performed with or without percussion instrumental accompaniment. *Dikir barat* is usually performed by group of ten or fifteen members led by the *tok juara* who is often the person in charge of the musical training of the group. While *tok juara* plays a pivotal role in the first segment of the performance, the *tukang karut* (often the former *tok juara*) is the creative leader of the group in the next segment. *Tukang karut* is expected to utilize current socio-political issues which will be relevant to the audience by singing *pantuns* (oral poem indigenous to the Malay world). Unlike *wayang kulit* and *mak yong*, the Malaysian government actively promotes *dikir barat* as an important part of Malaysian national culture and even has crossed the causeway (Singapore) in the mid-1980s.

performance as it contradicts Islamic teachings and can be considered as heresy. In response to the objections of Jusoh against *wayang kulit*, Awang Lah with a satirical under-tone responds saying that the negative view of *wayang* is a result of the narrow-minded of the understanding of Islam rather than the influence of *wayang kulit* performance. Moreover, in the end of the film Hatta Azad Khan reveals the hypocrisy of an antagonist character (Jusoh) that attempts to purify his society from any heretical practices by condemning *wayang* as un-Islamic art form but he is paradoxically a sexual assailant as he attempts to rape Melur (Awang Lah's adopted daughter). In order to pass down *wayang* tradition, Awang Lah teaches two adopted orphan and disabled children, Awi and Menur, how to perform *wayang*. In one scene he symbolically gives the *wayang* statue (*patung wayang*) of Rama and Sita to Awi and Menur just before he collapses and dies in the midst of his performance. However, film critic Adam Abd Jamal (2009) notes that *Wayang* is an "ordinary love story" (between Awi and Melur) and it failed to transform the spirit of *wayang* performance into the film. While Jamal's criticisms to certain extent are valid, he has overlooked some interesting issues related to locality and Islam in Kelantan. Since *wayang kulit* performance have been officially banned in Kelantan, the theme of the film deliberately challenges the claim and legitimacy of political and religious authorities in banning what are "non-Islamic" (pre-Islamic) arts like *wayang* that may cause moral peril and are not suitable to be performed and viewed by Muslims. In his analysis of *Wayang*, Malaysian film scholar, Anuar Noor Arai (2008), highlights that the underlying anguish of people in Jusoh's kampong is a political delusion created by religious people in local politics.

Likewise, Khoo Eng Yow's *Wayang Rindukan Bayang* records the lives of the few remaining puppeteers (*dalang*) who hold steadfastly onto their dying art.¹⁴ Currently

¹⁴ One of the *dalangs* (puppet masters) of Kelantanese *wayang kulit* in this documentary remarks that in the 1960s there were 300 *dalangs*. However, in 2012 there are only approximately 15 *dalangs*

Wayang performance has become the victim of conservative state policies and religious puritanical influences. In an interview Khoo explains the reason behind the making of his documentary:

[T]here are many restrictions on the presentation of various Malaysian performance arts. Among art forms gradually moving toward this difficult situation, *Wayang Kulit* faces particularly strict government regulation. I know these circumstances well, so I chose this subject. By focusing not on *Wayang Kulit* itself, but rather on the lives of its puppeteers, I made a documentary that communicates the difficult situations other art forms find themselves in as well ("For the Future of Performing Arts," 2014).

Given the high sensitivity of the ban of *wayang* in Kelantan, the filmmaker did not intend to screen his documentary in Kelantan but rather in several film festivals outside Malaysia (interview with Khoo Eng Yow, 11 January 2012). By documenting the lives of few survived *dalang* in Kelantan, Khoo expresses his concerns on the fate of rich cultural heritage like *wayang* that has been deprived from its roots in Kelantan society by the political and religious authorities. As the Malay title of the documentary can be literally translated to "shadow puppets long for bygone shadows," the documentary strongly reflects the circumstances in which *wayang kulit* cannot be performed and the loss of rich Malaysian cultural heritage. Khoo's interest in the issue of heritage actually is not new as he has made a documentary film on the field historian who explores temples and graveyards to archive epitaphs, trace lineage and record oral history in *Ah Kew the Digger* (2003). His first feature length *The Bird House* (2008) tells the story of a tension within a family caused by conflicting interests among the members of family as one family member insists to sell the old house for the sake of money while another family member wants to preserve the house for its invaluable cultural heritage.

Of course, there is irony in the ban of *wayang kulit* in Kelantan. As one of shadow puppeteers in *Wayang Rindukan Bayang*, Abdul Rahim Bin Hamzah, says, "Mua Thay

still active in Kelantan due to the restrictions on *wayang kulit* performance by the Islamic party (Parti Islam Se-Malaysia or PAS) that controls Kelantan state since 1991.

[*Tomoi*] has been considered as a sport. But there is gambling involved. The audience bets on the winner. But there is no betting in *wayang kulit*. And yet they [the Kelantanese government] do not ban *Mua Thay*. The promoters can get permit and profit from the ticket sales. But as a puppeteer, what am I supposed to do? Work in the day, perform at night. How can I elevate this Malay art form?" So, as a shadow puppeteer, I only get to perform three times annually. How can I earn a living in that way?" Another shadow puppeteer, Ibrahim Che Mat, remarks that since the ban on performing *wayang* publicly by the Kelantanese government, he relied on what he can get in his own backyard and he never goes to Kota Bahru city as no one invites him to perform.

Indeed, the ban of *wayang kulit* is ideological if not completely nonsensical. As the art activist and director of PUSAKA (a non-government organization dedicated to supporting the viability of traditional Malaysian art forms), Eddin Khoo remarks:

In 1990 after 12 years of Barisan Nasional (BN) rule in the state, the Kelantanese overwhelmingly voted for a PAS-led government. PAS were then part of the APU (Angkatan Perpaduan Ummah) with Semangat 46, but it later became clear, they were the party leading the alliance. They came to power basically on the platform of Islamising society, of leading Kelantan into a pure Islamic form of government. One of the first decisions was to proscribe all kinds of activities that were regarded as unIslamic; so gambling went and alcohol sales were limited. But one of the things that was most surprising was the decision to ban traditional performances. When they decided to ban these performances, the state government had no clause under which to place the ban, so the ban actually comes under acts of vice. Prostitution, gambling, and *Wayang Kulit* all come together (Khoo, Tikamdas & Wong, 2003, p.31).

It should be noted that while the Kelantanese shadow puppeteers are predominantly Malays, *Wayang Rindukan Bayang* also shows a famous Chinese shadow puppeteer from Pasir Mas named Eyo Hock Seng (commonly called as "Pak Chu") who had been involved in shadow puppet performance since his childhood and is famous for his art of storytelling (*bahasa wayang*). The Kelantanese Chinese puppeteer, Kang Boon Ang, from Kota Bahru also performs *wayang* following years of making puppet dolls

(*patung wayang*) and *Wayang Dollah Baju Merah* despite his day job as a motorbike mechanic. Thus, it can be argued that *wayang kulit* does not exclusively belong to the Malay ethnic group, but is rather a part of Kelantanese culture influenced by the complex encounter with India, Thailand and Indonesia. Like Hatta Azad Khan's *Wayang*, *Wayang Rindukan Bayang* argues for the importance of acknowledging and respecting *wayang kulit* as more than just a cultural heritage but rather cultural rights of people of Kelantan particularly in dealing with political and religious authorities. In other words, *wayang kulit* embodies the sustainability of culture and its community.

The other films that deal with Kelantanese people in a more contemporary context are either set in the metropolitan or in the border area. One notable film on Kelantanese people is *Budak Kelantan*. Although *Budak Kelantan* is set in Kuala Lumpur, most of the dialogue is in Kelantanese in order to show the origin of the main characters. The story is about a young man (Bucheck) who journeys from his hometown (Kelantan) to the capital Kuala Lumpur to pursue his study. Coming from a pious Muslim background, Bucheck is simply shocked knowing that his fellows Kelantanese (particularly his childhood best friend, Jaha) in Kuala Lumpur are involved in dirty business and wild lifestyle. This film provides a daring portrayal of the Kelantanese from an alternative perspective and in a realistic way (such as gang rape, consuming alcohol and drugs, and gang fights) in contrast with what has been propagated by the Kelantan authority. It also represents how Kelantanese encounter the urban environment yet they cannot totally escape from their root as Malay Muslim. As one film critic writes, *Budak Kelantan* is an honest depiction of many "deviant" actions unlike mainstream Malay cinema such as *Remp-it* (dir. Ahmad Idham, 2006), *Evolusi KL Drift* [dir. Syamsul Yusof, 2008] and *Evolusi KL Drift 2* [dir. Syamsul Yusof, 2010]. However, at the same time, it does not hide the reality that Malay is inseparable from Islam like in many films such as *Cinta* [dir. Kabir Bhatia, 2006] and Yasmin Ahmad's films [*Sepet* and

Gubra] (Zakir, 2010, p.87). In short, this film reflects how Malay Muslims in Malaysia unavoidably confront the secular world and urban culture.

A recent film set in a border town in northeastern Malaysia (“badlands” of Malaysia) is Dain Iskandar Said’s *Bunohan* (English title “Return to the Murder”). As Said states in the director’s note, he drew inspiration from his childhood memories growing up in the border of Tumpat [part of Kelantan], tapping into a tapestry of stories of assassins, kick boxers and smuggler told to him by his policeman father who patrolled the border (Southeast Asian Film Festival Catalog, 2011). Not surprisingly, a film critic describes *Bunohan* as “much closer to the arthouse meditation than that of the martial arts film” and its story “pays more attention to the murky family and social environment” (DeForce, 2011, para.1). Perhaps most audiences both local and global easily mistake *Bunohan* for an action (martial arts) film as the poster depicts one of the characters (Adil) wearing *Mua Thay (Tomoi)* costume and clenching his fist with the backdrop of other characters (Ilham and Bakar). Funded by the Creative Industry Loan Scheme (administered by FINAS), *Bunohan* is produced by a small film production company “Apparat” (set up by film director Dain Said Iskandar and Nandita Solomon). Since this film received a loan (through a government owned bank *Bank Simpanan Nasional* or National Savings Bank), the film producer needs to recoup the production cost from ticket sales in Malaysia or selling rights to foreign distributor (personal interview with Nandita Solomon, 16 January 2012). Premiering at the Toronto International Film Festival, this film travelled in many international film festivals before commercially released in Malaysia in March 2013.

The story of *Bunohan* revolves around the three estranged brothers – Adil, Bakar and Ilham – and their ailing father Pok Eng, as the brothers’ fate is tragically intertwined in a web of deceit and corruption. Ilham (literally, “inspiration”) is a professional killer who is hired to kill his half-brother kick boxer Adil (literally, “justice”), but he finds that

it is necessary to redress family grievances. Meanwhile, Bakar (literally, “burn”), who has been living in the city as a teacher and businessman, hopes to sell the family’s land to resort developers. Although at first glance Ilham is the main antagonist in the film, as the story unfolds Bakar is actually the real antagonist character as he has orchestrated many killings in his own family. His profession as a teacher as well as Malay businessman in a city, Bakar is easily associated with a typical loyal supporter of the Malaysian ruling party UMNO. Moreover, Bakar employs various dirty tactics to achieve his goal to sell the family’s land no matter the price he must pay. Bakar’s ambition to make his own profit from his family in order to serve the interest of resort developers reflect the nature of Malay (*bumiputera*) businessmen who took a lot of advantages from the National Economic Policy (NEP) and the collusion between developers and *bumiputera* businessmen who used their rights to enrich themselves.

It should be noted that Dain Said employs *wayang* performance style in framing his story. In several scenes Pok Eng is seen playing with shadow puppets, Said treats his film frame is simply like a screen (*layar*) in the *wayang kulit* performance. Of course, this is a brilliant idea since shadow puppetry (*wayang kulit*) has been dubbed as a proto-cinema. The end of the film reveals the fictive nature of the film by showing the torn screen of the shadow puppetry performance with Pok Eng’s blood splitting on it simply like “the collapse of fourth wall”. More importantly, *wayang kulit* in *Bunohan* echoes the characters on the screen and becomes a gentle reminder for the audience that there is always a “great mastermind” (*dalang*) behind all actions taking place in the film. Therefore, as the story unfolds, *Bunohan* gradually challenges the audience to discover the mastermind (*dalang*) and to draw links between the seemingly fragmented and tangled actions.



Figure 4.5. Still from Dain Iskandar Said's *Bunohan*
Ilham (hired assassin) leaves his mother's grave in Bunohan kampong located near the beach where the new resort will be built by the developer.

Despite compelling narrative layers of *Bunohan*, the depiction of natural landscape begs further elaboration. Since the film is set in the border area far from the capital, the audience is able to see various landscapes such as beach with white sands, dense swamps and forest. For Said, natural landscapes in his film have their own characteristics rather than merely forming the backdrop of the story (interview, 28 December 2011). For instance, upon arriving in his village, Ilham discovers the resort developers have removed his mother's grave to another place. In response, Ilham brings back all her bones and buries them in the original place. For Ilham, land is closely related to his emotional connection to his ancestors rather than a valuable property that can be easily sold to the resort developers for the sake of money. The dense swamp not only emblemizes mysteries (secrets) such as the mythic half-human crocodile that emerges abruptly when wounded Adil and his close friend escape from the Thai gangsters, but it is also a site of violent (criminal) act where Ilham brutally kills his enemies. Moreover, Dain Said deliberately uses the border town as an interstitial space in which various elements/influences merge (Islamic and pre-Islamic practices) and where the border is porous. With almost minimal music score, *Bunohan* evokes various atmospheric sounds

that allow viewers to feel aurally the natural landscape without any disruption from the artificial non-diegetic sounds. As his classical article entitled *Nonindifferent Nature*, Soviet film theorist and director Sergei Eisenstein wrote, film landscape is “the freest element of film, the least burdened with servile, narrative task, and the most flexible conveying moods, emotional states, and spiritual experiences” (cited in Lefebvre, 2006, p. xii). In short, Bunohan as a real territory in Kelantan has been completely transformed into “Bunohan” as a new cinematic landscape and became a microcosm of contemporary Malaysian politics characterized by intrigues, deceits and murders.

It should be clear that in contemporary Indonesian cinema (*Jermal* and *Mirror Never Lies*), which constructs peripheral landscapes, children characters occupy significant positions particularly in the maritime parts of Indonesia. In contrast, adult (elder) characters are quite dominant along with the portrayal of Kelantan landscape in contemporary Malaysian cinema. Like many cinemas around the world, “an image of childhood fits well with the image of the rural as something ‘other,’ different, more slow paced” (Kidd, 2006, p. 219). As can be seen in *Jermal* and *Mirror Never Lies*, the stories move at a slow pace like a child’s sense of time that is “more elastic, more flexible, less subject to rational world of clock” (Kidd, 2006, p.219). In addition, while natural landscapes sometimes become an obstacle for children to pursue their dream, it is also a source for learning and wisdom. However, both *Jermal* and *Mirror Never Lies* construct the image of children, which have not allowed them to be innocent, naïve or happy; instead, childhood for them is filled with neglect, abuse and loneliness. Hence, both films have used a particular childhood experience as a pretext to further explore at the dystopian and anti-idyllic aspects of peripheral areas in contemporary Indonesian society.

Meanwhile, in contemporary Malaysian cinema such as *Wayang*, *Wayang Rindukan Bayang* and *Bunohan*, the peripheral landscape (Kelantan) along with elder

characters (i.e. Awang Lah, Pok Eng) embodies tradition, cultural heritage (*wayang kulit*) and history. However, in these three films cultural heritage is not limited to the preservation of dead artifacts or relics from the past, but rather “inheritance of ideas, attitudes, and thinking about humanity, culture and society” (Goh, 2012, p.47) that has been misconceived and suppressed by religious and political authorities in Kelantan. In these three films, landscape is not merely spectacularly beautiful, but is also a signifier of a venerable past. By constructing the peripheral landscape in cinematic representations, the filmmakers evoke the erasure of cultural heritage and tradition in contemporary Malaysian society due to political interest of religious conservative authority. Rather than simply bringing a nostalgic feeling, these films bring the urgency to respect the cultural right of community living in the peripheral area and preserve invaluable cultural heritage.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have attempted to illustrate the importance of space and place in contemporary Malaysian and Indonesian cinema in imagining a more inclusive and egalitarian society. Rather than using the dystopian urban images simply to launch their critique of current capitalist consumption and crisis of modern life, Indonesian and Malaysian filmmakers use those images to imagine the possibility of the seemingly impossible in current socio-political systems of these societies such as the space of post-ethnic and democratic communities. The intertwining of urban crisis and troubled youth as can be seen clearly in *Virgin*, *Anak Halal* and *Songlap* which evoke a space of hope despite hopelessness since these films celebrate the optimism albeit the treacherous life passage of young people in these societies today. In particular, the portrayal of dysfunctional family in *Songlap* not only criticizes the prescribed concept of the

Malaysian nation in the government aggressive campaign of “1Malaysia,” but most importantly it constructs young people as crucial agents altering Malaysian society.

Likewise, the construction of racialized landscapes in *Chalanggai*, *Love Conquers All* and *CINtA* does not limit the possibility of interracial relationship and develop trans-ethnic solidarity to build up more hospitable place. Therefore, contemporary Indonesian and Malaysian indie films affirm Jacques Rancière’s famous axiom of equality in politics in which certain uncaptured subjects appear to disrupt conventional (policed) forms of looking, of hearing and of perceiving. In particular, Malaysian and Indonesian cinema is one of political possibilities to expand “trans-ethnic” or “post-ethnic” spaces where are still limited due to the persistence of Malaysian ethno-nationalist inclination along with Malay supremacist political culture while in Indonesia is currently witnessing the threat of harmonious plural society into one which is delineated along religious-ethnic lines. At the same time, contemporary cinema in both countries become a possible space for “the part of no part” (Rancièrian’s term) that has been sidelined, marginalized and invisible within Indonesia’s and Malaysia’s plural society, to be articulated into cinematic representations.

Meanwhile, by constructing some remote areas far from the capital through evocative cinematic imageries, Indonesian and Malaysian filmmakers not only have complicated the margins spatially and culturally, but also situate the margins within a national space and refashion the position of marginalized space in the national landscape in both countries. Although a “father” figure is obviously absent (perhaps symbolizing the failure of patriarchal state in protecting its citizens) both in *Jermal* and *Mirror Never Lies*, children as protagonists embody hope or utopian desire of better Indonesian society. In general, cinematic imageries of innocent children coupled with the natural landscape are used to highlight the value of conventional (conservative) family. However, the absence of the “father” figure in *Jermal* and *Mirror Never Lies*

underscores the agency of children in dealing the challenges of the natural environment marked by the absence of state and patriarchal domination (control). Meanwhile, cinematic representations of adult (elder) characters in *Wayang*, *Wayang Rindukan Bayang* and *Bunohan* as custodian of tradition highlight the importance to acknowledge the cultural right of Malaysian people as well as to sustain a “heritage as knowledge” (Goh, 2012) in order to “create empowering possibilities of the future” (Goh, 2012, p.54). Indeed, alternative (different) imaginaries of Indonesian and Malaysian society are not without problems. Therefore, in the next chapter I will explore various responses, reactions, and controversies from different social groups over new Indonesian and Malaysian cinema both through social and state censorship.

CHAPTER 5
PLAYING IN THE DARK:
CONTROVERSIES, PROTESTS AND FILM CENSORSHIP

*Democratization is a dynamic process that always remains incomplete
and perpetually runs risk of reversal – de-democratization*

Charles Tilly (2007, p.xi).

*We do not have pre-censorship anymore, but you still
have to submit to the censors once it is finished.*

In a way, reformasi is a kind of over-rated.

Nia Dinata (Baumgärtel, 2012, p.205)

*The crucial problem of political cinema is not to accept or reject
interference by the censor but to create work that makes*

the censor's methods inoperable

Andrzej Wajda (1997: 109)

This chapter presents controversies, protests and acts of censorship toward “troubling” films in which various social actors actively involve in generating their views (opinions) and controlling films. Although controversies surrounding film perhaps to certain extent may be a smokescreen of marketing tactic, there are still peculiar subjects that ignite such controversies. However, this chapter is less interested in discussing the speculations surrounding commercial motive behind controversial films, but rather it looks at what really is at stake in the controversies. While Chapter Two, Three and Four have extensively discussed the proliferation of filmmaking and the creation of various cinematic texts or narratives in broadening democratic spaces in Indonesia and Malaysia, this chapter examines the paradox of *Reformasi* that is marked by the persistence of “conservatism” as a counterforce against the liberalization process

particularly in the production of multitude images by young filmmakers as well as social activists. Thus, the aim of this chapter is to provide a nuanced understanding of the making of permissible (acceptable) and impermissible (unacceptable) subjects in Indonesian and Malaysian cinema in the context post-authoritarian regimes in both countries, as film has been perceived as a powerful medium and a threat to social order and political establishment.

Bearing in mind the paradox of democratization process in Indonesia and Malaysia, this chapter dispels an uncritical assumption that various forms of film censorship fundamentally disappeared after the dissolution of the authoritarian regime in Indonesia and Malaysia. Therefore, this chapter examines the persistence of censorious impulses both among political authorities and conservative groups that tends to circumvent the excess of freedom or liberation intensified by visual medium like film in a newfound democratic climate. In this chapter I argue that the controversies, protests and acts of censorship not only reflect the complex contour of public discourse on the cultural senses of the boundaries of “normalcy” and “morality” in society, but also the presence of a policed visual regime in which visibility is still subject to control in the *Reformasi* era. In other words, the visibility as articulated through cinema is constantly under a “police order” (using Jacques Rancière’s term) that prescribes reality and people’s sensibility in relation to the underlying norms that define what is allowed and not allowed, available or unavailable in a given situation. Nevertheless, the controversies and protests surrounding films highlight the ongoing struggle against the invisibility of the marginal and social/political taboos from the underside of dominant ideology in which film becomes a potent agency in imagining a just, ethical and egalitarian society. Not surprisingly, the persistent resistance either in political or symbolic forms always overshadows the continuation of censorship practices.

In order to elaborate my argument above, this chapter will be divided into four interrelated sections. The first section illustrates protests and controversies over “troubling” films that revolves around issues of sexuality, religion, race/ethnicity and history either related to cinematic representation and/or extra-cinematic issue. The second section further discusses the emerging role of Islam as a (national) morality that surfaces on the controversies as well as practices of film censorship in contemporary Indonesia and Malaysia. The third section outlines the unfolding film censorship law and regulation that attempt to partially accommodate the new developments in the Indonesian and Malaysian film scenes but heighten stricter “Islamic” morality in society. Rather than an unchanging regulation, film censorship can be understood as a political symptom that keeps evolving along with regime change. Finally, the last section discusses various forms of resistances against film censorship initiated by filmmakers and other social groups in Indonesia and Malaysia to contest the legitimacy of film censorship in order to make a more democratic society.

Controversies and Protests Against “Troubling” Films

Illustrating freedom of speech in Malaysia, a media scholar Zaharon Naim, quotes a joke, “There’s an old running joke about freedom in Malaysia that goes like this: in Malaysia there’s freedom of speech but no freedom after speech” (2013, p.169). Apart from this brilliant joke about the condition of freedom of speech in Malaysia, what Zaharom Nain has written might reflect not only the uncertainty of freedom of speech in Malaysia but it also the limitless control against freedom of speech. Indeed, this also applies to Malaysian and Indonesian cinema since their powerful images and sounds have been perceived as source of disruption or destabilization for social norms and morality and, to a certain extent, the political establishment. Not surprisingly, Indonesian and Malaysian cinemas unavoidably invite controversies and protests even

after approval or passing the film censors. This section illustrates various controversies and protest against “troubling” films that might lead to acts of film censorship or simply express the dissatisfaction to the decisions of film censor board that are too lenient in protecting morality of society. This section also delineates what really is at stake in various controversies or protests and identifies various groups within society, which have created controversy and stirred up the issues.

Two years after the 1998 *Reformasi* in Indonesia the practice of film censorship remains fundamentally unchanged in which the old framework of the previous regime (New Order) was used to censor film. For instance, Tino Saroenggalo’s *Student Movement* (2002) was censored which reflects an attempt to prevent any film criticizing the involvement of military in politics by manipulating issue of national security. The censor board (LSF) changed the original title of the film (*The Army to Force Them to Be Violence*) and cut some scenes, which show the military brutality against the student protests in order to prevent any hatred toward military. Here, the practice of film censorship was seemingly isolated from the undergoing democratization process in many sectors. At the same time, controversies, protests and subsequently acts of “censorship” exercised by social groups outside the censor board started emerging within society that reflect the paradox of democratization process in Indonesia.

Findo Purwono’s¹ *Buruan Cium Gue* (Kiss Me Quick, 2004)—a teen film dealing with the youngster’s first French kiss—perhaps a perfect example of a controversial film that drew great media attention. For instance, a weekly news magazine *Gatra* chose *Buruan Cium Gue* controversies as its cover story with a provocative title “Censor Me Quickly” (*Buruan Sensor Gue!*)—a playing puns of the film’s title on the film poster. This is understandable since the famous Muslim tele preacher KH Abdullah Gymnastiar

¹ Findo Purwono is neither part of the film directors who declared “I-Sinema” manifesto nor actively involved in a movement to revitalize the Indonesian film industry as I discussed in Chapter Two. Unfortunately, I am unable to find out a biography of Findo Purnomo.

(commonly called “AA Gym”) at the height of his popularity, protested against *Buruan Cium Gue* and was eventually supported by other Muslim leaders, in particular the member of the Indonesian Council of Muslim Clerics (*Majelis Ulama Indonesia* or MUI). Moreover, some representative of other religious organizations such as Theo Bella from a Catholic organization (the Indonesian Committee on Religion and Peace), Karel Gustam from Protestant church and Karel Waas from the Orthodox Church attended the meeting led by AA Gym with the censor board (LSF). The protest started when AA Gym delivered his monthly preach at the Istiqlal Mosque in Jakarta on 8 August 2004 and followed by sending a letter of protest to the minister of culture and tourism by MUI that urged the government to the withdrawal of *Buruan Cium Gue* in major film theaters. Likewise, a group of people in Lampung province (Southern Sumatera) urged the government to stop the distribution of the film. Moreover, the director of LSF admitted that LSF had already received many letters and short message service (SMS) from people protesting the film.

According to AA Gym, the promiscuous title of the film persuades the young people (as main target audience of the film) to practice a pre-marital sex (*zinah*). In other words, the film was condemned as likely to corrupt the youth with carnal desires. Although he actually did not watch the film, he questioned the educational value of the film and the ulterior motive of film producer/filmmaker. Similarly, the vice chairman of MUI, Umar Shihab, opined that the film’s title is like licensing young people to kiss.² In his view, the film producer is merely seeking for profit by putting a provocative film title

² “Kissing” scene in film, indeed, had been a source of controversy in the history of cinema. Thomas Alva Edison’s *Kiss* (1896) starred by Broadway actors Mary Irwin and John Rice and based on the last scene of the stage musical *The Widow Jones* (Danesi, 2013, p.118) has created controversy. While the “kiss” itself lasts 20 seconds (of the 47), it caused uproar as citizens called for police action wherever it was showed, arguing the authorities to charge even those attending with engagement in obscenity (Danesi, 2013, p.118). In the context of Indian cinema, the ban of kissing scenes based an “unwritten law” rather than written law. It seems that the ban may be related to a “nationalist politics of culture” (Prasad 1998, p.88). Kissing is described as a “sign of westernness” and therefore alien to Indian culture. As a result, in keeping with the logic of justification, this principle had never been applied in censorship of foreign films (Prasad, 1998, p.88).

in order to attract the young audience. Put aside the provocative title, there were some serious “moral” concerns related to the film as stated in an attachment of the MUI’s letter of protest to Minister of Culture and Tourism. First, there is a scene that depicts a bunch of students are laughing at their teacher who punished two students caught kissing at the school premises. Second, there are dialogs in the film that can be interpreted to encourage students to practice kissing. Third, there is an inappropriate scene for students explaining how to kiss. Fourth, most scenes on student’s life in the film tend to depicts many events that are not related to study such as partying, drinking alcohol and gossiping about the kiss (Salim, 2004, p.25).

However, young people (film audience) and other filmmakers had different opinions about the film. For most young people, who were interviewed by *Gatra* magazine, scenes in *Buruan Cium Gue* are far from vulgar and even normal as can be found easily in many Indonesian films in the major film theaters (“Yang Muda Menilai,” 2004). In addition, other young audience opined that the kissing scene is a bit out of date and even less erotic compared to other Indonesian films that have passed the censors and not even banned by the government. Interestingly, according to Selviana, a medical student of Universitas Indonesia, the protagonist character, Adi, should be a good role model for young people as he did not kiss his girlfriend until the right time came (“Yang Muda Menilia,” 20004). Meanwhile, according to Indonesian leading film director, Garin Nugroho, there is a taboo law in film that always makes a contradiction between the permissible and non-permissible (i.e. violent acts are acceptable in a martial arts/ action films) but the greatest artistic responsibility should be on the film director. Another film director and scriptwriter, Arswendo Atmowiloto, remarked that *Buruan Cium Gue* simply provides a contemporary portrayal of Indonesian young people. He firmly believed that the film would not affect the young people since the predominant influences come from their peer groups, television and the Internet. Finally, after

considering the recommendation of the Indonesian Film Council (*Badan Pertimbangan Perfilman Nasional* or BP2N) that files and forwards public complaints/ protests against film to the government, Minister of Culture and Tourism, Jero Wacik, withdrew the film from major film theaters. In the digital (VCD) release, film producer actually only made some minor changes. For instance, the title “Kiss Me Quick” (*Buruan Cium Gue*) was slightly changed into “Only One Kiss” (*Hanya Satu Kecupan*) in which the “controversial” word “kiss” is still retained rather than thwarted.

Indeed, the withdrawal of *Buruan Cium Gue* drew criticism from filmmakers and social activists who concern with the freedom of artistic expressions and prospect of democracy in Indonesia. For instance, on 26 August 2004, a collective movement called the “Exponents Supporting Freedom of Expression” (*Eksponen Pendukung Kebebasan Berekspresi*) in Jakarta, which consisted of 63 signatories with various social backgrounds (filmmakers, writers, singers, poets, visual artists, graphic designers, political activists, etc.), expressed their critique of the withdrawal of *Buruan Cium Gue* through a political statement.³ In their statement, while they admitted the varied quality of Indonesian films, they emphasized the importance of clear and just film regulation and the protection of freedom of artistic expression. They also boldly stated that no one has an authority to punish and suppress other’s freedom in the name of politics, moral, religion and social customs. This is because the ban of film (or arts in general) can be manipulated any time to suppress the freedom to express art and thereby endangers Indonesia’s democracy (Harsono, 2004).

The controversies over the films indicate that the persistence of censorious powers from Indonesian society rather than from the censor board albeit political liberation wrought by *Reformasi*. In addition, there is seemingly a contestation between

³ The complete political statement of “*Ekspresi*” and the list of 60 signatories can be read on Andreas Harsono’s blog (www.adreasharsono.net). Andreas is a journalist cum human rights researcher and one of the signatories of *Ekspresi*’s Statement.

the conservative as represented by religious organizations (as well as censor board) and liberal (secular) group as represented by young people, filmmakers, artists and social activists. For some filmmakers and social activists, the controversies over *Buruan Cium Gue* were an attempt of LSF to broaden a political alliance with social organizations (particularly religious groups) in order to strengthen the power of film censorship and suppress the freedom of artistic expression. Meanwhile, the protest of AA Gym (who led many religious organizations to meet the chairperson of LSF) against *Buruan Cium Gue* may be a test of his popularity and influence in mobilizing public support for a presumably “good” cause and maintains his power by stirring up issue of morality among young people. This is perhaps understandable since there were some Indonesian films with kissing scenes passed the censor without any public uproar or protests. According to Djamelul Abidin Ass, a secretary of Commission B of LSF, all the members of LSF agreed that they should cut a kissing scene in *Buruan Cium Gue*. They finally cut the scene from 90 seconds to 15 seconds long or equally 3-meters out of total 2,300-meter long film reel (Guritno, 2004, p.31). This can be argued that initially the censor board viewed *Buruan Cium Gue* was not controversial and provocative thereby they only cut a very minor scene like what they routinely conduct in censoring most Indonesian films.

While early social censorship in the post-*Reformasi* was targeted at teenage films with explicit erotic scenes that are deemed morally corrupt and will deprave young people, the subsequent social censorships concerning issue of ethnic identity emerged in various social protests against provocative films occurring outside the capital Jakarta. This is understandable since *Reformasi* in Indonesia has led to the decentralization or local autonomy (*otonomi daerah*) that boosts a local pride and reawakens local or ethnic identity in a newfound democratic climate. Not surprisingly, social protests against films that are deemed to undermine particular ethnic identity took a new ground since issue of ethnicity was almost absent during the New Order era. For instance, in 2007, a

local group in Makassar (South Sulawesi) called Community Concern of Morality of South Sulawesi (*Masyarakat Peduli Moral Sulawesi Selatan*) protested and stopped the screening of Monty Tiwa's *Maaf, Saya Menghamili Istri Anda* (Sorry, I've Impregnated Your Wife, 2007). This comedy film tells the story of a nerd and unemployed guy who has impregnated an unhappy wife of a thug (*preman*), but due of misunderstanding he is instead forced to marry the thug's sister. This film was protested against because it has not only portrayed one ethnic group (ethnic Batak) in Indonesia in a negative way as a thug (*preman*), but the story and promiscuous film title was deemed unsuitable for the mostly conservative Indonesian population. Interestingly, the Simamora Clan Association in Jakarta and neighboring cities (*Keluarga Besar Simamora se-Jabodetabek*), whose name is used for the thug character, accepted the apology of the film director during the press conference in the XXI film theatre in Jakarta on 19 June 2007 (Anugrah, 2007). In his apology, film director Monty Tiwa states that the similarity between the name of one character in the film (Lamhot Simamora) and the real name of one of Batak clans is simply coincidence not by intention.

The similar social protest concerning local identity occurred in the city of Karawang (West Java Province). On 14 and 15 February 2011 some social organizations in Karawang in West Java such as youth organization (*organisasi kepemudaan*), local art council (*dewan kesenian daerah*), Islamic clerics council (*majelis ulama*), the Alliance of Karawang Women (*Aliansi Perempuan Masyarakat Karawang*) and the Federation of Women Organizations (*Gabungan Organisasi Perempuan*) protested and asked to stop the screening of horror film entitled *Arwah Goyang Karawang* (The Spirit of Karawang Dancer, dir. Helfi Kardit, 2011) ("*Arwah Goyang Karawang*," 2011). For the protesters, the film has tarnished the image of famous traditional Kerawang dance (*ibing jaipong*) by making an erotic or sexually arousing dance like a "striptease" dance. Responding to the social protest, film producer changed the title of this film from *Arwah Goyang*

Karawang to Arwah Goyang Jupe -Depe (The Spirit of Jupe-Depe Dance). In fact, the last two words of the title refer to popular nicknames of film stars: “Jupe” for Julia Perez and “Depe” for Dewi Perssik. According to film producer Shankar RS, since Karawang dance has been popular he initially used it as a title. Meanwhile, film director Helfi Kardit admitted that most films have both positive and negative sides and he did not intend to degrade people of Karawang (Sompotan, 2011). Instead of discrediting the Karawang dance, he intended to show that particular people have exploited (*menyalahgunakan*) the dance for their own profit in some nightclubs, which has degraded its artistic value of the dance (“Film Arwah Goyang Karawang,” 2011).

Another social protest also concerned the issue of undermining particular professions like nurse as a main character of many Indonesian horror films. Given the popularity of Indonesian horror films with an iconic “monstrous nurse” (such as *suster keramas/* shampooing nurse and *suster ngesot/* crippled nurse), the Indonesian Nursing Students Association (*Himpunan Mahasiswa Keperawatan*) in South Sulawesi on 22 January 2008 protested *Suster Keramas* (Shampooing Nurse, dir. Helfi Kardit, 2010) that have painted a bad image of nursing, an otherwise noble profession, and had particular scene deemed to be pornographic (Yudono, 2010). Moreover, this film was also protested against by the Council of Islamic Clerics (*Majelis Ulama Indonesia*) in Samarinda (East Kalimantan) and even the Minister of Women Empowerment and Child Protection (*Menteri Pemberdayaan Wanita dan Perlindungan Anak*) Linda Amalia Sari. Most critics addressed the pornographic image of the film since the film starred the Japanese porn star Rin Sakuragi. Three years later, the same protest against the negative image of nurses in a horror film *Bangkitnya Suster Gepeng* (The Awakening of a Flattened Nurse, dir. Nuri Dahlia, 2012) occurred in Makassar. On 26 September 2012, The Student Alliance Concerning Nurses (*Aliansi Mahasiswa Peduli Perawat*) held a demonstration prior to the official release of the film on 11 October 2012 in the front of South Sulawesi

governor's office due to the negative representation of nurses and the exploitation of female sensuality in film. Hence, the profession of nursing is mistakenly associated with "pornography" (Bilal, 2012). In fact, the protest was provoked by the film poster, which depicts the monstrous nurse wearing a nurse signage, rather than by the titillating content since the film was not released yet.

Some controversies and social protests above brought to the fore different issues concerning morality, ethnic representation, local culture and even a particular profession. However, it seems the underlying issue is "morality" or what is deemed unsuitable for the mostly conservative Indonesian people because of obvious erotic or sensuality elements in films protested. Interestingly, those troubling films actually have passed film censors that presumably comply with the film censorship guidelines, but then the censors ask film producers to alter the objectionable elements of their films. The demand for more strict censorship perhaps reflects the fear of the excess of freedom brought about by the euphoric *Reformasi* that has been perceived as being exploited by film producers to seek profit through the production of some titillating films. Such dissatisfaction to film censors' decisions also can be interpreted as the inability of the censors to accommodate the emerging moral force within Indonesian society in which various religious as well as social groups claim themselves as a guardian of morality of society. Moreover, those "moralist" or "Islamist" groups not only emerge in Jakarta (as can be seen initially in the controversy over film *Buruan Cium Gue*), but also in many areas outside the capital such as Lampung (South Sumatera), Karawang (West Java) and Makassar (South Sulawesi). This probably informs the expansion of societal Islamization in Indonesia in which enforcement of strict morality seems one of its main objectives.

It is noteworthy that other social censorships or controversies even occurred in the pre-production stage when the film directors announced their plan to make a film. For instance, when in 2001 the Indonesian leading film director Garin Nugroho

announced his plan to make a feature film tentatively entitled *Izinkan Aku Menciumku Sekali Saja* (Let Me Kiss You Just Once), he has been protested against by the *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school). The film is about a young Muslim boy in a *pesantren* who dreams to kiss a Chinese girl whom he met on the way to his school (*pesantren*). For the protesters, kissing (in non-marital relationship) is not allowed and hereby it should be banned. After receiving protests from *pesantren* representatives, the producer retracted funding for the production and the film director relocated the setting to Papua where the Roman Catholics are predominant religion of the Papuan population. Finally, in 2003 the film was released with a new title *Aku Ingin Menciummu Sekali Saja* (I Want to Kiss You Just Once) and completely different story about the conditions of young people in Papua and the issue of the worrisome spread of HIV among them. Interestingly, the protest against the filmmaking is not limited to Islamic groups. For instance, the Indonesian Hindu Women's Movement (*Gerakan Perempuan Hindu Indonesia*, GPHI) protested Garin Nugroho's plan to make a film entitled *Shinta Obong* (The Burning of Shinta). Although the film was still in the pre-production stage, the protesters think that the film potentially strays from the standard version of *Ramayana* epic, which was perceived a sacred text in Hinduism.⁴ The film was finally released in 2006 with the new title *Opera Jawa* (Requiem from Java) and travelled in many prestigious international film festivals (such as Venice International Film Festival, Toronto International Film Festival, the International Film Festival Amsterdam and so on) and generated praise from film critics.

Another form of social censorship against the film in the pre-production stage was *Lastri* directed by the veteran film director Eros Djarot whose directorial debut *Tjoet*

⁴ Garin Nugroho's film was one of several films commissioned by Peter Sellars for the New Crowned Hope Festival in 2006 in Vienna to celebrate the 250th anniversary of the birth of the famous music composer Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. Other film films commissioned for the project included *I Don't Want to Sleep Alone* by Tsai Ming-Liang (Taiwan) and *Syndromes and a Century* by Apichatpong Weerasethakul (Thailand). Inspired by "The Abduction of Sita" episode from the *Ramayana* epic, Garin's film features installation arts and uses a Javanese gamelan ensemble as a musical illustration.

Njak Dien (1988) was screened in the prestigious Cannes International Film Festival in 1989 and became Indonesia's official submission to the 62nd Academy Awards for Best Foreign Language Film category. *Lastri* was based on Ita F. Nadia's book entitled *Lastri: Suara Perempuan Tragedi 1965* (*Lastri: The Voice of Women Victim of 1965 Tragedy*), a teenage love triangle involving members of two communist front organizations, Gerwani (communist women's organization) and *Consentrasi Mahasiswa Indonesia* or CGMI (communist affiliated student organization), and young soldier. In November 2008 in the village of Colomadu, Karanganyar, Central Java, a mob attempted to stop the film from being shot (produced). Previously, two Muslim groups The Islamic Defender Front (*Front Pembela Islam* or FPI)⁵ and The Moon and Crescent Party of God (*Hizbullah Bulan Bintang*) protested the plan of film production and alleged that the film would "spread communism." In order to avoid any security risk, mayor Karanganyar prohibited Eros Djarot to shoot the film in his region. According to the film director, *Lastri* is meant to be a melodramatic romance between two lovers set in the tumultuous political period in 1965. In addition, the title *Lastri* also can be read as "LastRI" or "**Last Republic of Indonesia.**"

Meanwhile, given the strict film censorship in Malaysia, most films that have already passed by the censors hardly provoke any huge social protest or banning.

⁵ The Islamic Defender Front (FPI) perhaps is the Islamic conservative group that actively involves in various protests against "controversial" films recently. This group was founded on 17 August 1998 by religious scholar of Hadrami background, Rizieq bin Husein Syihab (commonly called "Habib Rizieq"). Habib Rizieq studied at LIPIA and then took first degree at King Saud University, followed by master's degree in Malaysia. Since the beginning FPI has unclear relationship with security officials, General Wiranto and Police Chief Nugroho Jayusman. On 13 December 1999, FPI broke and occupied Jakarta City Mall demanding that city government close discos, cinema, restaurants and message parlors during Muslim fasting month (*Ramadhan*). Initially, several acts of FPI were not targeted exclusively to film, but rather the acts can be found in various forms such as ransacked the headquarters of the National Commission of Human Rights (Komnas HAM), burned a Protestant church south of Jakarta, threatened to shut down the American embassy in Jakarta, and so on. In those various acts, FPI extolled the slogan from a Quranic phrase "enjoining good and opposing vice" (*al-amr bi'l-ma'ruf wa nahy 'an'l-munkar*) to justify their cause in carrying out an attack to what so-called dens of iniquity and mobilize members staging protest what they claimed to be enemies of Islam. Although FPI main activity has been Jakarta and West Java, it also established branches in Central and East Java (Ricklefs, 2012, p.420).

Probably the only exception was Amir Muhammad's *Lelaki Komunis Terakhir* (The Last Communist, 2006) that was banned by the Minister of Home Affairs just ten days before the film was scheduled for screening at four film theatres across Malaysia on 18 May 2006 although it had been passed by the censors.⁶ However, after protest from a journalist Akmal Abdullah of the Malay right-wing newspaper *Berita Harian* that accused *Lelaki Komunis Terakhir* celebrated the former leader of the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM), the Minister of Home Affairs suddenly revoked the permission for film screening. According to Deputy Home Minister, Datuk Tan Chai Ho, the film was banned because "the public was not very happy about the movie" ("Public wants movie banned, " 2006). However, it seems that the ban was based on the protests from the youth wing of the dominant political party (UMNO) since the film portrayed the early life and legacy of Chin Peng, an exiled leader of the banned Communist Party of Malaya. However, at another occasion, explaining why his ministry overruled the Censorship Board's decision, Home Affairs Minister Radzi Sheikh Ahmad said that although, "[t]here is no violence shown in the movie." He added, "It will be like allowing film portraying Osama bin Laden as a humble and charitable man to be screened in the United States" (as cited in Muhammad, 2007, p.89).

After a special film screening⁷ Malaysian Minister of Culture Dato' Rais Yatim comments, "The presentation of this film is ahistorical. It is better if the film pays attention to other aspects. Unlike documentary films we saw, the texts in this film are

⁶ On this Facebook page dedicated to the film Last Communist, Amir Muhammad wrote that the shooting of his film had the necessary permit from the National Film Development Corporation (FINAS). Hence, it was not "guerilla" or "underground" shoot and Red Films is a licensed production company (Muhammad, 2006).

⁷ All debates on *Lelaki Komunis Terakhir*, particularly among Malaysian politicians, in this section derived from Amir Muhammad's documentary *18MP* (part of his DVD compilation entitled *6hots* (2002)), unless otherwise stated.

displayed in an unusual way.”⁸ He further disregarded the nature of Amir Muhammad’s film as a semi-musical documentary as he did not see element of musicality in the film. Responding the journalist’s question whether he likes or not the film, Rais Yatim quickly answers: “Some of you will be very hurt. That is not the reason why I see. I as Ministry of Culture see this movie from the creativity point of view and I already told you. I have thought that the movie should have a different level of narrative... I don’t want to go into the security part because we don’t look for that. We are not competent to comment on that.” Furthermore, answering the Malay-language daily *Berita Harian* journalist Zainuri Misfar’s question concerning the factuality of communism in Malaysia, Rais Yatim states,

As I said before, all the sentences in film (about Chin Peng) are similar with the book as sold in the bookstores. The interpretations depend on the individual knowledge and access. In book about Chin Peng as a widely distributed in the market, all facts are already there and there are no extraordinary matters on the screen. But, as I said before, from the cinematography point of view the film is unlike common films we usually watch.⁹

Meanwhile, responding Nisa Sabayanagam from *The Strait Times* daily, who asked about the portrayal of the people in the film, one member of parliament from UMNO simply said: “Ridiculous, ridiculous. I am from there [Sitiawan]. It doesn’t show at all Chin Peng was in Sitiawan. It is not true. When he was born and afternoon school he went [...] It doesn’t go beyond that.” Similarly, Rais Yatim stated that the film did not incorporate data and interviews with other relevant persons, but he refused to comment on whether there are national security issues involved in the film since he does not have

⁸ *Film ini ahistoris dalam persembahannya. Dan sebaik-baiknya harus ditonjolkan dalam aspek lain. Sebab kami selalu melihat film dokumentari, jarang dalam bentuk ini di mana tulisannya dipamerkan sebegitu, tidak dalam naratif.*

⁹ *Saya katakan tadi, semua ayat-ayat yang dipamerkan di dalamnya tak ada yang berbeza daripada buku yang disahkan jualan di kedai-kedai itu. Tetapi interpretasi pada satu pihak itu, terserahlah pada mereka untuk pengetahuan dan sebarannya. Dalam buku yang dijual mengenai sejarah Chin Peng, semua fakta itu sudah ada dan tidak ada sesuatu yang ganjil tampak di layar perak. Cuma seperti saya nyatakan tadi, dari sudut sinematografinya, dianya tidak berada di tahap yang sentiasa kita lihat, selalu kita tonton.*

any authority to talk about it. He said that there is no artistic merit at all in the film. The UMNO senator Jins Shamsuddin, who is a veteran actor and film director, also commented on the film in terms of artistic and cinematographic aspects. He said, "To me, the film should be reedited to make more clear. Sometimes you are lost half way which is it. I see from the professional point of view. You see the singing [in the film] is out of tune. It is not professional at all. There is a lot of room to improve if you are talking professional point of view. I am not talking about different point of view." However, unlike Minister Rais Yatim, one of the members of parliament from the ruling party UMNO boldly says that the movies should be banned but, ironically, some facts should be corrected.

On the contrary, responding the BBC journalist Jonathan Kent 's question regarding the film ban, the female MP from oppositional party said: "Actually communism is really the story of the past... It is only a portion of this movie that shows ex-communist members expressing their views and their involvement in the past. They basically told what they have done and they admitted their mistake. If you have seen the movie just now, I don't see any strong reason for the government to ban the movie."

Similarly, opposition leader of the Democratic Action Party (DAP), Lim Kit Siang states:

I couldn't find anything to be outraged about. Because it doesn't glorify communist party or Chin Peng and it doesn't promote communism. In fact, even Chin Peng doesn't appear. [This is] why at the first instance the censor approved it [...] It should not be banned. I think it should allow the public to decide whether they like the film and whether it becomes success or otherwise. Furthermore, it is very ridiculous if Malaysia bans the semi-musical documentary, but it is available in Singapore and people can go down and see it. People will be asking the question why it is being banned in Malaysia. It will give Malaysia a very bad name that we are not ready to be open and tolerant and welcome cultural creativity in an era of ICT.

Finally, asked by the *The Sun* journalist Bissme's about the screening of the film in Singapore without any fear, Rais Yatim says: "I think the degree of openness is always there to be argued. But it doesn't mean that if Singapore shows, you should show."

The ban of *Lelaki Komunis Terakhir* unavoidably drew many criticisms from social groups that concerns with civil rights and freedom of expression. For instance, the Centre of Independent Journalism (CIJ) Malaysia strongly criticized the ban of the film. Its executive director Sonia Randhawa stated, "The fact that minister can ban a movie because people who have not watched it have protested [also] demonstrates that the government is not interested in transparency." She also described the government's response to uninformed populist views as "knee-jerk reaction that lack of thinking ("Decision to ban movie," 2006). Similarly, the National Human Rights Society (Hakam) in Penang described the ban as "another nail in the coffin" for artistic expression in Malaysia. According to its president, Cecil Rajendra, the decision of the ministry was ironic since the Censorship Board had passed the film uncut and seen it fit for general viewing. He further said that the curbing of artistic freedom has led to the brightest and most creative and innovative artists tending to emigrate or stay abroad after their studies as they will be suffocated in their own country ("Decision to ban movie," 2006).

Amir Muhammad's next film *Apa Khabar Orang Kampung* (Village People Radio Show, 2007) was also banned by the Censorship Board on 12 February 2007. According to the Censorship Board Chairman Datuk Mohd Hussain Syafie, the board viewed the film four times, with one special screening for 10 Special Branch officers ("Apa Khabar Orang Kampung banned," 2007). He further said that the film distorted historical fact and was critical of the Malaysian government and of the first Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman's role in the failed 1965 Baling talks with the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM).¹⁰ For Syafie, unlike Amir's previous film, *Lelaki Komunis Terakhir* (2006)

¹⁰ "Baling talks" were held in Malaya in 1957 as an attempt to the Malayan Emergency situation. The main participants of the talks were Chin Peng (Secretary General of CPM), David Marshall (Chief Minister of Singapore) and Tunku Abdul Rahman (president of UMNO and the new chief of the Federation Government). The talks were unsuccessful since the term "surrender" was not acceptable to the Communist Party of Malaya. After the talks, Chin Peng retired in Thailand and Ah Hai replaced him as acting Secretary General of CPM in Malaya. For more insights of the Baling Talks from an insider's perspective, see Chin (2003).

was historically correct and hence the censor gave green light in the first place though finally it was banned by the Ministry of Domestic Affairs. While Amir was not surprised with the ban, he was puzzled that what he had shown in his film has already been published in books, though with a slightly different point of view. Moreover, he says, "Presenting different point of view is proof of democracy. It appears we have strange democracy" ("Apa Khabar Orang Kampung banned," 2007). Regarding the idea of the making his documentary, Amir remarks, "My job as director is to document. Viewers are assumed to be intelligent enough to the interviews without going amok, and to come to their own interpretations" ("Amir appeals," 2007). Artis Pro Activ (APA), a non-political arts grouping, said the ban of *Apa Khabar Orang Kampung* contrived Article 10 of the Constitution which guarantees freedom of expression. APA director Anne James said, "A country cannot call itself a democracy and demand that all citizens share a singular official point of view" ("Amir appeals," 2007). Similarly, commenting the ban of the film, a historian Cheah Boon Keng remarks, "The (board's) reason reflect intolerance to alternative historical events. Only in a totalitarian state is there only one version—official version—of any historical event" ("Communists' role recognized," 2007). Like in the case of his previous film *Lelaki Komunis Terakhir*, Amir Muhammad appealed against the ban of his film, but in the end the censors did not lift the ban.

The recurring controversy over the fear of the spread of communism ideology occurred recently during the release of Wong Kew-Lit's film *The New Village* (Malay title "*Kampung Bahru Cina*") in August 2013. The film is about a romantic love story between a Chinese girl and a communist guerilla fighter set in the relocation process of the Chinese community by the British colonial government into a new village during the Communist Insurgency in order to combat the communist struggle. The UMNO Youth chief and Youth and Sport Minister Khairy Jamaluddin commented that the censor board (LPF) should review the film carefully as he found the trailer of the film has some

elements that romanticize the Malaysian communist struggle, hence the film should be banned if it will be proven to glorify communism. Moreover, another UMNO Youth member, Lokman Noor Adam said the time of the film release is inappropriate as it will be in coincidence with the Malaysian Independence Day celebration on 31 August while film tend to portray communist as a hero (Michael, 2013). Responding Khairy Jamaluddin's comments on the New Village, the Chief Minister of Penang, Lim Guan Eng remarked that why UMNO Youth posing communism when Khairy Jamaluddin in 2009 has announced the creation of Permanent Secretariat to strengthen the ties between the UMNO Youth and The Communist Youth League of China. In rebuttal against Guan Eng, Khairy Jamaluddin wrote on his Twitter, "How can Guan Eng not know the difference between the PCM terrorist and China's Communist Party? Comparing apples to durians to score cheap points." Due to the controversy over The New Village, The Minister of Information has directed LPF to review the film (Kini TV, 2013).

Meanwhile, the racial issue has previously sparked before the official release of a big-budget and government-sponsored film *Tanda Putera* (English title "Incurable Heroes," 2012) directed by the veteran film director Shuhaimi Baba.¹¹ Set during the tumultuous times in the Malaysian history in the late 1960s, *Tanda Putera* focuses on the relationship between the two ailing Malaysian leaders Tun Abdul Razak Hussein and Tun Dr Ismail Abdulrahman but it also depicts the racial riots on 13 May 1969 following the success of Democratic Action Party in the 1969 general election that won 20 percent of seats in the parliament. In particular, the much publicized and controversial scenes were the portrayal of a communist as a cold-blooded terrorist and an incident of two men urinating in a flag pool in the Chief Minister of Selangor's office. In the official

¹¹ *Tanda Putera* was one of films funded by the Malaysian Film Corporation (FINAS) under the State and Heritage Scheme (*Skema Film Kenegaraan dan Warisan*). According to the Assistant Minister of Information, Communication and Culture, *Tanda Putera* costs RM 2.7 million or almost doubles the cost of commercial film in Malaysia. Another film the same scheme is *Antara Dua Langit* (Between Two Skies), that was part of co-production with Australian company, costs RM 2 million (MPPAS2010, 2012).

launch of the DAP internet TV “Ubah TV”, The Democratic Action Party Secretary-General Lim Guan Eng said boldly, “*Tanda Putera* is a racist film because it incites a racist hatred based on false facts and manufactured events.” Furthermore, he disagreed with the idea to allow the film for private screening and instead he asked to ban the film for public screening (Free Malaysia Today, 2013). Finally, after three times’ cancellation and much criticism, *Tanda Putera* was released publicly on 15 November 2012 during school holidays. Responding various accusations against her film, in the press conference Shuhaimi Baba says that there is no depiction of DAP characters in the film and the scene of racial riots, which is only ten minutes long, is only the backdrop of the political role of Tun Dr Ismail in resolving political problem in Malaysia. Moreover, she refused a request of some politicians for a preview (special screening) to review the film as it is like a form of censorship previews are usually conducted for mass media, family of artists and crews or focus group instead of politicians (Rakyat News, 2012). In the press conference, the Chief Minister of Penang, Lim Guan Eng, requested the cinema operators not to screen *Tanda Putera* as it provokes hatred against certain ethnic community and may disrupt the harmony in multireligious and multiethnic society in Penang (Penang Buletin, 2013). Having seen the film in the first day of screening, which only 15 people attended, one of audience said that the film has some scenes portraying the Chinese people in a negative way that may mislead the audience without the proper understanding of the actual Malaysian history. Not surprisingly, one of the commentators on the YouTube makes pun of the title of the film by calling it “*Tandas Putera*” (Male Toilet) instead of “*Tanda Putera*” (KiniTV, 2013).

It should be noted that controversies over film in the Malaysian context are also extra-filmic representation. For instance, Namewee’s *Nasi Lemak 2.0* (2011) has incited some protests due to the filmmaker’s past action and ethnic background rather than the content of his film. On 8 September 2011, Faizal Effendi Hashim, president of a new

lobby group, The People First Movement of the State of Perak (*Pertubuhan Gagasan Rakyat Didahulukan Perak*), organized dozens of people to protest the screening of *Nasi Lemak 2.0* and urged the government (Ministry of Information and Culture) to ban the film due to the background of filmmaker who rose to fame in 2007 after rapping over Malaysia's national anthem (*Negaraku*), criticizing police corruption, government bias against the ethnic minorities and complaining over the dominant Islamic culture in Malaysia.¹² Malaysian film director Mamat Khalid, who made a multicultural-themed film *Estet*, also criticized Namewee for what he has done in the past in which he has insulted Malaysians in his song entitled *Negarakuku*. Therefore, Mamat on his blog reminded the Malay community not to easily forget and forgive what Namewee has done in the past (Khalid, 2011). Likewise, the Malay-language daily, *Utusan*, carried out a piece of opinion in which the writer said she refused to watch *Nasi Lemak 2.0* despite famous cast members since Namewee had previously insulted Malaysians, particularly Malays and Muslims.

Interestingly, the Malaysian government endorsed the film because it precisely reflected the government slogan "1Malaysia." Moreover, the Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak invited the film director Namewee for a meeting to symbolically show his endorsement. As reported by the media the Prime Minister called Namewee as "a strong supporter of 1Malaysia." In particular, he remarked, "What is important is that Namewee and other parties support what we are doing for the country. I understand he is a strong supporter of "1Malaysia," so I encourage him to continue with his views as a blogger and [in] other media such as film." Of course, many were

¹² While studying at Ming Chuan University in Taiwan in 2007, Namewee released his song entitled "*Negarakuku*" (a pun of Malaysia's national anthem "*Negaraku*" or "My Country") on YouTube channel. This song has sparked controversies since the Malay-language media *Harian Metro* accused him for ridiculing Islam (Muslim), undermining national anthem and incited hatred within society. However, Namewee denied that he has undermined Islam and Muslim instead he wanted to show the real conditions in Malaysia. He further accused that *Harian Metro* has incited hatred among ethnic groups in Malaysia ("*Negaraku*," 2007).

skeptical and even doubted the sincerity of the endorsement of the Prime Minister as he run-up for the 2012 election by constructing himself as a “cool” reformist leader promising democratic reforms to security (Internal Security Act) and press law (including film censorship) in his Malaysia Day address.

It is noteworthy that some groups that involved in controversy and protested against “troubling” films can be divided into four categories: (1) temporary (ad hoc) committees such as *Masyarakat Peduli Moral Sulawesi Selatan*, *Himpunan Mahasiswa Keperawatan*, *Aliansi Mahasiswa Peduli Perawat*, *Aliansi Perempuan Masyarakat Karawang*, *Gabungan Organisasi Perempuan*, *Pertubuhan Gagasan Rakyat Didahulukan Perak* (2) institutionalized social organization such as *Himpunan Mahasiswa Keperawatan*, *Majelis Ulama Indonesia*, *Front Pembela Islam*, *Hizbullah Bulan Bintang*; (3) formal political organizations such as United Malay National Organization (UMNO) along with its media mouthpiece *Berita Harian* and Democratic Action Party (DAP). While temporary (ad hoc) committees are issue-based organization and usually disbanded after their demands were met, institutionalized social organization and political organizations are more permanent and able to continue their protest in the future. In particular, for institutionalized social organizations and cinematic representations actually are a pretext to insert their presence through controversy. As explained in Chapter One, both groups that pro and against film censorship or film ban are not engaged in dialog as the film itself becomes a pretext to pursue a political agenda: either political control or protection of freedom of expression.

Furthermore, some controversies and protests against films also occurred in the pre-production stage, particularly when the filmmakers plan to make a film dealing with the theme which is deemed politically too “sensitive” like the history of communist movements in Indonesia and Malaysia. In other words, the protest is not necessarily related to the film as a real entity (product) but the idea of making a film about

communism in the past. Interestingly, the sentiment of anti-communism both in Indonesia and Malaysia mainly come from Malay nationalist and Islamist groups. In other words, communism (which is stereotypically associated with ethnic Chinese) is perceived as the main enemy of Islam as well as state although communists were involved in an anti-Japanese occupation movement and anti-colonial movement in Malaysia (then Malaya) during British colonialism in which some Malays (not only Chinese) joined. In particular, despite accusations of ridiculing the national anthem and Malaysian nationalism, film director Namewee was also accused of insulting Malays and Islam when a group of people protested his film *Nasi Lemak 2.0*. The next section will further discuss the dominant discourses of Islamic morality in film censorship both in Indonesia and Malaysia.

The Specter of Islamic Morality

In the last ten years, film has become the major concern of religious elites and groups in Indonesia and Malaysia. Indonesian leading film director Garin Nugroho, for instance, calls that contemporary Indonesian conditions marked by two extremes come from market and religious fundamentalism (Razukas, 2009). In particular, the strong debates about the draft Anti Pornography Bill (*Undang-Undang Anti Pornografi*) as well as after the parliament passed the Bill in April 2008 signaled the increasing role of Islam not only in setting of moral standards but also in driving state policy. As Pam Allen puts it, “The rhetoric of much of the Islamic support of the Bill has been couched in highly charged warnings about the danger of anarchy, hedonism, free sex, obscenity, globalization and degenerate West, from which Indonesian nation must be protected” (2007, p.101). Likewise, Islam in Malaysia had been adopted into legal system as manifested in Syaria Law and Syaria Court despite the existence of Civil Law and Civil Court. In addition, Islam has been bureaucratized in Malaysia as can be seen in the

establishment of many state-affiliated Islamic institutions such as the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (*Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia* or JAKIM), Department of Federal Territory of Islamic Affairs (*Jabatan Agama Islam Wilayah Persekutuan* or JAWI) and the like. Some of these institutions intervene to film scene, particularly if the film touches Islamic issues.

As discussed in the previous section, the first of Islamist group intervention into a film scene after *Reformasi* was the withdrawal of *Buruan Cium Gue* from the major movie theatres although the censors passed it.¹³ In particular, there are some debates provoked by controversial films, which explicitly displayed Islamic symbols inappropriately. Moreover, the debates are also triggered by local horror films, which were deemed contradict to Islamic belief or values since they display some explicit sex scenes. According to one of the members of film censor board, Jamalul Abidin Ass, while sex is the most censorious subject, issues related to Islam also incites some controversies in Indonesian society as there are various interpretations to Islam among Muslims (personal interview 4 November 2011). Although there are some Islamic representatives in film censorship board, elites of Islamic groups feel that they are still underrepresented and they have very limited influence on the final decision of the censor board.¹⁴ Therefore, the Indonesian Muslim Clerics Council (MUI) has been considering to recall

¹³ Indeed, as Barker (2011) notes, protest against film deemed unsuitable with Indonesian as well as Islamic value is not new as it can be traced back in 1950s. For instance, the Indonesian Islamic Student Organization (*Pelajar Islam Indonesia* or PII) protested Dr Huyung's first film *Antara Bumi dan Langit* (Between the Earth and the Sky, 1950) in which its promotional still showed the two lead characters kissing (Barker, 2011, p. 130).

¹⁴ When a horror film *Suster Keramas 2* (Shampooing Nurse 2, dir. Findo Purwono, 2011) starred by the Japanese porn star Sora Aoi passed the censor, many questioned the film censor's decision, particularly the role of representative of the Indonesian Council of Islamic Clerics (MUI) in the board. Responding to that case, in an interview with the media, a member of culture division of MUI, Cholil Ridwan, states that if public find that particular film that has passed the censors still has some inappropriate scenes, they should blame the work of film censor board (LSF) instead of the film producer. This is because the MUI is still underrepresented in the board, so he always "loses" in the voting (Mahfiroh, 2011).

its member in the film censor board (personal interview with Kholil Ridwan, 29 November 2011).

When Indonesian filmmakers deal with controversial issue (i.e. homosexuality), they should not make any clear indication against Islam (deemed as “un-Islamic”) or otherwise Islamist groups will attack them. For instance, many were surprised that the first Indonesian film with a passionate gay kissing scene *Arisan!* (Gathering, dir. Nia Dinata) was passed by the censor board without any controversies emerging in society. In fact, this film has been stuck in the film censor office in several days because the board members were deadlocked in deciding whether the film passes or not. Finally, the film was passed by the censor with few cuts after the intervention of newly appointed film censorship board director and later it was screened in many major film theaters without any trouble. In an interview, film director Nia Dinata recounts the reason why her film passed the censor because the title is “Arisan,” a private gathering with lottery and popular in Indonesia (Baumgärtel, 2012a, p.208). Further, according to Dinata, “She [the chairperson of censor board] felt it was safe, because with such a title, it would not attract the interest of the Islamic groups and the fanatics” (Baumgärtel, 2012a, p. 208). While the film title of *Buruan Cium Gue* has provoked controversy and protest, the film title of *Arisan* has prevented from the attention of Islamist group. In other words, despite film content, the title can be a target of protest of Islamist groups.

Although his film clearly carries the banner of Islam, Hanung Bramantyo’s *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban* (Woman Wrapped in a Turban, 2010)¹⁵ has sparked controversy among religious conservative groups including an Islamic political party. The protest first started from the Great Imam of Istiqlal Mosque Ali Mustafa Yakub, who accused that the film could created a bad impression of the Islamic boarding school (*pesantren*) and led to misunderstanding of Islamic teachings, particularly Islam’s

¹⁵ See Chapter Three for detailed narrative of *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban*.

treatment of women. He further called for a boycott of the film or at least its withdrawal from the film theatres and correction before re-release (Yunanto, 2009). Likewise, president of The Prosperous Justice Party (*Partai Keadilan Sejahtera* or PKS) Tifatul Sembiring endorsed Ali Mustafa Yakub's boycott call to the film. Although he had not seen the film yet, based on his reading of the controversy in the mass media he believed that the film should be corrected to prevent more controversy in society as it has misinterpreted Islamic teachings (Dewi, 2009). Responding to some criticisms against his film, Hanung says, "The imam wants to follow the voices of those wanting to slander the film. How could he make such a statement when he hasn't seen the film?" However, the boycott call drew criticism from a moderate Muslim scholar, Siti Musdah Mulia, who called on Muslims to defy the boycott call and asked that the government not ban the film. Furthermore, she says, "I think the film uncovers the real condition of female Muslims. As Muslims we don't like to see our religion stifling women. But practically, it is still like that [...] Muslims should be honest in facing this reality and recognize the fact that some ulema and religious leaders often offer misguided teachings on the rights and obligations of women in Islam" ("MUI Clerics", 2009). Likewise, the Ministry of Women Empowerment (*Menteri Pemberdayaan Perempuan*) Meutia Hatta supported the film because it captures the real social problem in which women are still discriminated against and suppressed due to the misinterpretations of Islamic teachings. Moreover, she encouraged the film director to make other films dealing with the women's issues that inspires women ("Perempuan Berkalung Sorban," 2009).

By the same token, Hanung Bramantyo's next film "?" ("*Tanda Tanya*" or Question Mark, 2011)¹⁶ sparked some furors and protests from some Muslim elites and organizations. After attending the special screening of *Tanda Tanya*, the chairperson of the Indonesian Islamic Mission (*Dewan Dakwah Islamiyah* or DDI), Dr Adian Husaini,

¹⁶ See Chapter Three for detailed narrative of *Tanda Tanya*.

remarks that *Tanda Tanya* is harmful (*merusak*) and excessive (*berlebihan*) in promoting religious tolerance in Indonesia that may disturb the social harmony (*kerukunan*). For him, the film has created bad images of Islam such as a Muslim as a terrorist who explodes a church and stabs the priest, and portrays apostasy as a 'normal' practice within Muslim community (Muslim Media, 2011a). Commenting on one character of the films that converts from Islam to Catholicism, Adian says, "Apostasy is serious issue in Islam. Someone who converts from Islam to other religions can be consider as an infidel... This film is a campaign of vulgar religious pluralism"¹⁷ (Muslim Media, 2011a). Similarly, according to public relations officer of DDI Taufik Hidayat, *Tanda Tanya* has stigmatized the Indonesian Muslim as perpetrator of terrorism without any sufficient explanation of the causes (personal interview, 25 November 2011). At the same time, according to Taufik, Islam has been commoditized in mainstream cinema; hence, Islam has become merely "spectacle but not guidance" (*tontonan bukan tuntunan*) or an "artificial Islamic showcase" (*Islam royo-royo*) through filmic representation (personal interview, 25 November 2011).

The same negative reaction to *Tanda Tanya* came from the head of Cultural Commission of the Council of Indonesian Muslim Clerics (MUI), Cholil Ridwan after attended the same special screening of the film. He remarks that *Tanda Tanya* promotes "theological pluralism" (*pluralisme teologis*) (along with the ideas of liberalism and secularism) that has been banned by MUI.¹⁸ According to Ridwan, Islam only allows

¹⁷ *Pindah agama itu serius dalam Islam. Orang pindah agama itu dikatakan murtad dan disebut dia kafir [...] Film ini mengampanyekan pluralisme yang vulgar.*

¹⁸ In July 2005, during its Seventh National Congress, MUI issued a "Fatwa on Religious Pluralism, Liberalism and Secularism." *Fatwa* is generally understood as legally binding opinions that are expressed by an Islamic scholars or *ulama* to settle a controversy of religious issue. According to MUI, the *fatwa* was the response to recent phenomenon of the spread of the idea of religious pluralism, liberalism, and secularism within society that has created uneasiness and uncertainties among Muslims. Therefore, the *fatwa* was intended to give some clarification and provide guidance to Muslim community. Interestingly, the *fatwa* has incited controversy among religious leaders in Indonesia, as it seems contradict to the democratic values (tolerance, pluralism, etc.) brought about by *Reformasi* and a sign of conservatism and an attempt to bring

“sociological pluralism” (*pluralisme sosiologis*) which recognizes the fact that there are many adherents of religions within society, but Islam does not endorse the universal truth of all religions, as Islam is the ultimate truth.¹⁹ Further, he says, “At any rate, the film is misleading (*menyesatkan*). I cannot believe that the film audiences give an applause in the end of the show, while the content of the film has really harmed [Muslims]”²⁰ (Muslim Media, 2011b).

While Adian Hussaini launched sharp criticisms against *Tanda Tanya*, he did not urge his fellow Muslims to boycott or ban the film. He only persuaded the filmmaker and producer to repent (*bertobat*), contemplate their mistakes and change their mind. Meanwhile, K.H. Kholil Ridwan viewed the film is “dangerous” (*berbahaya*); hence, persuaded his fellow Muslims not to watch the film as it will stray away from the right Islamic path. However, the Islamic Defenders Front (*Front Pembela Islam*, FPI) threatened the film theatre owner through the local government (Bandung) in West Java to bring down *Tanda Tanya* from film theatres. Moreover, FPI blocked SCTV television stations and threatened them not to broadcast *Tanda Tanya*, as they will be ‘sweeping’ SCTV office if they still insist to broadcast *Tanda Tanya*. The reason behind FPI’s protest seemed affirming Adian’s and Kholil’s criticism and objection against *Tanda Tanya*. As a spoke person of FPI, Habib Selon Assegaf said that *Tanda Tanya* is one of films that ruins the Islamic belief (*aqidah*) and propagates (religious) “pluralism” and “liberalism.”

Indonesian Islam closer to orthodoxy as well as often used to justify violence. For an interesting discussion on controversial fatwas on the Christmas and religious pluralism, liberalism and secularism, see Sirry (2013).

¹⁹ The *fatwa* document distinguishes between “religious pluralism” and “plurality of religions”. The former is defined as “an understanding that all religions are the same and the truth of every religion are relative; therefore, every follower of religion cannot claim that only his/her religion is correct while the other religions are wrong. Religious pluralism also stipulates that all followers of religions will enter and live side by side in heaven.” The latter can be defined as “a reality that in certain country or district there exist different followers of religions who live side by side.” (Majelis Ulama Indonesia, 2005, p.64). Based on this distinction, the *fatwa* is concerns with the former while accepting the reality of a multi-religious of Indonesian society.

²⁰ *Pokoknya ini film sangat menyesatkan. Ya, saya agak aneh, mengapa banyak orang tepuk tangan, padahal itu sangat melukai [umat Islam].*

Furthermore, he states that the film has strayed away from the Islamic path (*menyesatkan*) and the government must ban the film. Since there is no clear distinction made among apostasy, blasphemy and even heresy by the Islamist group, the Islamist groups are able to attack any discourse that stray away from the narrow bound of their conception of Islam. As a renown Muslim scholar Abu-Zayd eloquently argues, “[T]he charges of apostasy and blasphemy are key weapons in the fundamentalist’s arsenal, strategically employed to prevent reform of Muslim societies instead confine the Muslim’s population to bleak, colorless prison of sociocultural and political conformity” (2011, p.293).

The main concern of Hanung in his film *Tanda Tanya* was the crisis of the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims as well as between *pribumi* and Chinese marked by religious bigotry and violence. Indeed, this is a paradox since *Reformasi* (democratization) supposed to be a fertile ground for pluralism to foster. Meanwhile, by making *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban*, Hanung wanted to respond many protests from concerned women who perceived his commercially success film *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* (Love Verses, 2008) was pro-polygamy and promoted a patriarchal culture. As he says, “So I make this film [*Perempuan Berkalung Sorban*] to re-position women’s status equality, human beings are differentiated by their level of faith not by their gender.”²¹ Here Hanung clearly attempted to move from a commercially driven film production to a socially committed film production by clearly articulating the issue of gender equality within a Muslim community in his work. Responding critically many criticisms (particularly from Islamist media) against *Tanda Tanya*, Hanung wrote his detailed answers on his Facebook page.²² In general, he denied some accusations that his film promoted apostasy, religious pluralism and discredited Muslims and suggested some

²¹ Oleh karena itu saya membuat film ini untuk meletakkan kembali bahwa kedudukan perempuan dan laki-laki adalah sejajar, manusia hanya dibedakan dari tingkat keimanannya dan bukan dari jenis kelaminnya.

²² Due to space constraint, I do not put in details of Hanung Bramantyo’s responses to some criticism in this chapter. Hanung’s responses on his Facebook can be found on online media.

critics to watch his film closely and carefully before making a critical judgment. Much to Hanung's dismay, some vocal critics of *Tanda Tanya* have not yet seen the film but they firmly believed that the film has tarnished the Muslim image and promoted the misleading interpretations of Islamic teachings. Furthermore, in an interview with the ANTV station, Hanung remarked that film should be viewed as a mirror in which we can reflect our own image although we sometimes tend to deny it if our image is bad. He added, "Sometimes our society have high expectations on the film. Film should have a clear vision and mission. They have a great hope in the wrong place. Vision and mission are not for film. Film only provides a perspective"²³ (Topik ANTV, 2012).

Taking into account the rise of commercial Islamic film production, which might have strayed away from the Islamic path, some Islamic organizations actively engage by establishing an institution to monitor films and in the future will produce more 'proper' Islamic films. In 2010 the Council of Indonesian Ulama (*Majelis Ulama Indonesia, MUI*) set up a new division called the Commission for Islamic Art and Youth (*Komisi Seni Budaya Islam and Pemuda*) led by Indonesian veteran film director Chaerul Umam and former Indonesian "sex bomb" artist-turned devout Muslim, Inneke Koesherawaty. The main task of this commission is to monitor any films carrying Islamic symbols or embracing Islamic themes should be in accordance with *syariah* (Islamic) law.²⁴ Moreover, this commission is also aimed at educating Muslims in how to select and consume media in an Islamic way to prevent adopting un-Islamic elements disseminated by the media (personal interview with Cholil Ridwan, 29 November 2011).

²³ *Kadang masyarakat kita menganggap terlalu berlebihan tentang harapannya pada film. Film itu harus memberikan visi, misi seperti itu. Salah alamat. Visi, misi itu bukan untuk film. Film itu hanya memberikan perspektif.*

²⁴ In the end of my interview with Cholil Ridwan on 29 November 2011 at his office of MUI, he invited me to attend the seminar on "Islamic Arts" (Seni Islami) would be organized by MUI in the mid of December 2011. The aims of the seminar are to identify what so called "Islamic arts" (including film) in Indonesia and promote them as a model for Muslim artists. When I contacted him few days before the date of the seminar, he simply said that the seminar was cancelled without any clear reasons.

At the same time, one of conservative Islamic organizations in Indonesia such as the Indonesian Islamic Mission Council (*Dewan Dakwah Islamiyah/ DDI*) started thinking to train their *dakwah* activists by planning to set up an audio-visual laboratory. Further, DDI plan to produce many 'proper' Islamic films based on *syariah* because they think that their criticisms against mainstream cinema seems almost pointless as producers still make films continuously with the same formula and are even getting worse. While some films have portrayed Islam in a favorable way like Deddy Mizwar's *Kiamat Sudah Dekat* and other television dramas, they have not completely followed *sunnah* (Prophet's sayings) and holistic *dakwah* (personal interview with Taufik Hidayat, 22 November 2011). Therefore, in DDI's perspective it will be more strategic and effective to produce proper Islamic films by themselves rather than routinely criticize mainstream (including Islamic) films. Interestingly, according to public relations officer of DDI, Taufik Hidayat, the model of the proper Islamic film is "animation film" since there is no real interaction among film stars (particularly between legally unrelated (*bukan muhrim*) male and female) during the film production which guarantees no violations against *syariah* (interview, 22 November 2011). In fact, there is no clear concept of Islamic film among Muslim elites and community. The differences lie in whether Islamic film should explicitly or implicitly carry Islamic symbols or send Islamic messages. The film producer of Mizan Production, Putut Widjanarko, prefers to film with implicit messages of Islam and inclusive views of Islam (personal interview, 24 November 2011). Interestingly, the member of Indonesian Muslim Clerics Council, Cholil Ridwan, states that Islamic films even can be found in documentary films on animal kingdom as they reflect the Greatness of God (Allah) (personal interview, 4 November 2011).

The revival of Islamism in the *Reformasi* era after long repression during Soeharto's New Order has major consequences. On the one hand, the growing visibility of Islam in the mass media that more related to consumer culture; and on the other hand, the

growing influence of Islamist politics that urged for legislation of the Anti-Pornography Bill. The argument of Islamist groups in defending censorship and the Anti-Pornography Bill is almost identical as Din Syamsuddin (chairman of Muhammadiyah) says, “to stop this drift toward moral liberalization” (as cited by Paramadhita, 2012, p.75). The Islamist group in Indonesia not only concerned with the Indonesian commercial/ mainstream films, but they also attempted to control the screening of “alternative” films that dealt with sexual minorities’ issues. As John Badalu, the founder and former director of the “Q! Film Festival” (QFF), recounts, “There was a small demonstration by an Islamic group Front Pembela Islam [FPI, Islamic Defenders’ Front], at once our more progressive venues, Ruang Rupa. They came and blocked the entrance so the audience couldn’t go in, but they were not violent. They were just there saying, “You have to stop this festival.” The venue organizers explained to FPI that this was just a film festival, that it was not anything political. They even invited the FPI to watch the films. None of them wanted to go in. They didn’t say anything, they just left” (Chan Fui, 2012, p.76).

However, the Q! Film Festival organizers were quite scared of the possibilities of violent attack, or even the worst killing, from the Islamist group. The founder of festival John Badalu recounts, “I really had to think what would happen if I got killed. We had an emergency meeting with the organizers during the festival. We talked about the *Sabili* magazine article and that my name was now made public. If something happened to me in the next few days: “What are you going to do? Where will you be? Will you be there or will you disappear as well?! What would you like to do?” He adds, “The Q Community organizers were scared, but they still wanted the festival to go on, so I gave them a list of things to do: “If I die one of these days, these are the things you have to do.” (Chan Fui, 2012, p.76).

Meanwhile, there were debates around the negative influences of horror films in Malaysia. One of initiators of this debate was former Malaysian Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohammad when he criticized Malaysian horror films had corrupted Malaysian society. Shortly after, the National Fatwa Council (*Majelis Fatwa Kebangsaan Malaysia*) went on to describe local horror films as "counter-productive to building a developed society, especially among Muslims because they encouraged a belief in mythical beings." This in turn led the Malaysian Film Producers Association (PFM) that saw speakers comprising of local filmmakers Shuhaimi Baba, Ahmad Idham, Norman KRU and Pasha, to counter those claims. "With due respect to Tun Mahathir, it's not fair to blame horror films for any social problems that we have," director-producer Ahmad Idham was quoted as saying to defend his films who have been accused of glorifying the 'mat rempit' ('illegal racer') subculture and the mocking of Quranic verses in his latest movie *Hantu Bonceng*. "Some people are more easily affected by horror films, but that does not mean film-makers should be blamed for their fears," he added. "Some horror films might even end up reinforcing audiences' faith. Malay horror films, especially, advocated the Quran and Islam as a means of fighting evil" (Randhawa, 2011, para.6)

Moreover, film director Shuhaimi Baba remarked that she believed there are attempts by several "powerful groups" who are eyeing to sanction horror films in Malaysia. The director of *Pontianak Harum Sundal Malam* said, "We need to correct the wrong perceptions of local horror films. This genre can attract a lot of investment and has good export potential for our country. Why blame us when we have so many imported, more horrifying films from Hollywood, Korea, Japan and Thailand?" "Our local horror films are mainly comedy horrors anyway. Like *Hantu Bonceng*, *Ngangkung* and *Hantu Kak Limah Balik Rumah*. Real horror films don't do well at the Malaysian box office," she added (Randhawa, 2011, para 6). In another occasion, on talk show broadcast

by RTM2 on 20 January 2012²⁵ there was a discussion between Shuhaimi Baba and *ustadz* (Islamic teacher) from the Section of the Development Islam in Malaysia (*Jawatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia*, JAKIM) about the negative effects on horror films. Shuhaimi Baba said that the high rate of criminality in Malaysia could not be credited to local horror films (*filem seram*) alone. She argued that some murder cases happen during the general election. For her, there is no evidence that horror films cause the high rate of criminality. Horror films are simply a product of film industry and temporary trend. In contrast, *ustadz* of JAKIM on that talk show stated that in a horror-comedy film, someone could find easily the “*hantu khurafat*” (lit. blasphemous ghost) as well as “*ustadz khurafat*” (lit. blasphemous Islamic teacher). According to Islamic belief, there is no spirit (ghost) comes out from the dead body. Meanwhile, in Islamic belief the *ustadz* have no supernatural power by emitting light from his hands to destroy the evil ghosts as depicted in many local horror films.

The Malaysian film director, who had become a subject of controversy particularly in relation to Islamic issues, is Yasmin Ahmad. Her two films *Sepet* and *Gubra* (later *Muallaf*) have not only triggered some controversy, but they also have suffered from the scissor board. Fortunately, the cutting by the censors did not result in a totally incoherent narrative. Initially the Malaysian Censorship Board almost banned *Sepet* (Wie Ang, 2007). It was released locally only after suffering cuts at the hands of state censors, who noted its unflattering portrayal of Malay culture and its representation of Muslim characters who failed to perform their religion with sufficient piety (Sim, 2009, p.49). In a review published by local English dailies, Michael Fredericks lauds the film for its bold message: “Finally, someone got it right... It brings up, or rather touches upon issues that are considered 'sensitive' in our so-sensitive

²⁵ Accidentally, I watched this program during my fieldwork in Malaysia from 1 January to 28 February 2012. Like most talk show in RTM2 station, the conversation was less spontaneous while the host (interviewer) was too tied to the script. The increasing number of horror films and their popularity among Malaysian audience perhaps inspired this program.

society, but carries through with enough tact to get past the Censorship Board (**only eight cuts!**)²⁶, enough humor to keep us suitably receptive and tickled, and enough heart to help even the most hardened cynic believe" (emphasis added, Wie Ang, 2007, p.29). According to Yasmin Ahmad, one censor took specific issue with the film's indifferent attitude toward Islam, and asked why Orked [the female protagonist] did not attempt to convert her boyfriend (Sim, 2009, p.49).

In a live forum broadcast by Radio and Television Malaysia (RTM)1's *Fenomena Seni* (Arts Phenomenon) with an accusatively titled "*Sepet and Gubra Pollute our Culture*" (*Sepet dan Gubra Mencemar Budaya*) on April 23, 2006, film producer Raja Azmi Raja Sulaiman and *Berita Harian*'s film critic Akmal Abdullah castigate Yasmin's films for "polluting Malay culture" (*mencemar budaya Melayu*), for "insulting Islam" (*berunsur menghina Islam*), and for "portraying Malay and Islamic culture in a twisted manner" (*menyentuh prinsip asas budaya Melayu dan Islam secara penyelewengan*) (Wei Ang, 2007, p.29). Although both *Sepet* and *Gubra* are not quite radical or subversive to the Islamic core values, they have certainly made a few interventions in the questions and debates over religion (Islam) and race in Malaysia's mainstream cinema. In particular, *Sepet* disturbs the fact that its viewers have specific understanding of what cultural and religious traditions are, and how members of each racial community are expected to adopt practices that are specific to their communities. For instance, the panelist in RTM 1's live forum also condemned the film because it shows a Malay Muslim girl (the protagonist, Orked) walking into a pork stall (*kedai babi*) to meet with her Chinese friends. However, neither Orked, Jason nor Keong are shown to consume pork which is *haram*, or unclean, under Islam; Raja Azmi's criticism is directed at the fact that Orked hangs out with Jason and Keong in a Chinese eatery that is obviously non-*halal*.

²⁶ Regarding the censor of her film *Sepet*, in an interview Yasmin Ahmad says, "It was difficult, because of a very small of vocal people in Malaysia could not accept this type of film. The censors made nine cuts, and then I argued with them, and they made eight" (Baumgärtel, 2012b, p.250).

Interestingly, at the end of the program, 59% of the audience, voting through SMS (short message service) polling, agreed with the assertion made by the forum title (Al Amin, 2008, p.9).

Behind that television program, Yasmin Ahmad revealed that prior to the forum a representative of the Ministry of Information rang her and invited her to the forum, which she flatly refused to attend. She responded that the title of the forum alone was condemning enough (Al Amin, 2008, p.9). In addition, Yasmin confessed that one big producer hired three or four journalists to write any discredited news against the “New Waves of Malaysian Cinema” in which Yasmin Ahmad was assumed as an active member (Imanjaya, 2007). In contrast to the assertion made by the forum, the Malaysian scholar Ismail Abdullah (2009, p.168) applauds Yasmin's films as perceptive to many contemporary and marginal issues, various subcultures, conflicts and the social values of the multicultural Malaysia.

The obvious representations of Muslim (Islamic) features in Yasmin's films should not be perceived to mean that Yasmin adheres unquestioningly to the prescribed model of a good Malay-Muslim (as propagated by Islamists in Malaysia) since she also tests the limit of the Muslim identity boundaries by inserting some scenes such as the *kedai babi* (pork stall) in *Sepet* and the stray dog incident in *Gubra*. Of course, these minor scenes are easily overlooked by ordinary audiences (though not by Islamists), but pork and dog clearly mark the border between Muslims and Non-Muslims identity and even the word “pork” (*babi/khinzir*) and “dog” (*anjing*) are classified as vulgar and harsh words in the Film Censorship Guidelines. In particular, we read in Part Three and Section One of the Film Censorship Guidelines on advertising film (*filem iklan*) that all advertisements promoting pork (*khinzir*) and bacon-related products are forbidden. In Amir Muhammad’s observation (2009), *Sepet* may be the first time that pork is shown in

local film. It should be noted that perhaps there is “racism” in the antipathy of pork since pigs and pork is inextricably entwined with the Chinese (Muhammad, 2009, p.66).

The importance of respecting Islamic symbol or expression is highlighted in the film censorship practices as stipulated in the censorship guidelines in Malaysia. However, this may lead to the censor board made a ridiculous decision in cutting off images or muting the audio of some films. For instance, in commercial screening at Golden Screen Cinemas, Liew Seng Tat’s *Flower in the Pocket* (2007) has pixelated the puppy carried around by two Chinese boys at (Khoo, 2008, p.23). Since the sound of Azan could not be removed without erasing the dialogue, the filmmaker came up with the decision to pixel the puppy. Similarly, in Tan Chui Mui’s *Love Conquers All* (2006) when John and Ah Ping arrived at a seaside kampong and called out “*Assalamu’alaikum*,” the seemingly innocuous greeting is beeped out (Khoo, 2008, p.24). This seemed that a Chinese character is not supposed to utter that word. As a result, the “beeped” dialog makes it seem as if the Chinese character was cursing or speaking dirty words. The censor board perhaps has perceived those banal scenes as offensive or infringing cultural sensitivities, particularly among Muslim community in Malaysia. In short, what the censor has done also is making Islam as a singular cultural reference and neglecting the richness of cultural expressions embedded in Malaysian society.

It should be clear that Islam has become a new standard of morality in judging or measuring film as can be seen in many controversies and protests against film in Indonesia and Malaysia. Hence, political ideology is not really at stake in various controversies and protests rather the enforcement of strict Islamic morality. In Indonesia the rise of Islam as new moral force is an outcome of societal Islamization process marked by public visibility of Islam in various media (print, television, film, fashion, new media, etc.) and the uncanny return of a (grass root) political Islam. Meanwhile, the heightening of Islamic morality is almost natural outcome of state sponsored

Islamization process through bureaucratization of Islam and Islamization of bureaucracy. As a result, Islam becomes a dominant cultural reference while neglecting the richness of cultural expressions within Indonesian and Malaysian plural societies. The next section will further discuss the unfolding law and regulation of film censorship in Indonesia and Malaysia, which partially accommodate the socio-cultural dynamics within society but at the same time instill and heighten more rigid Islamic morality in society through film censorship regulation.

Censorship as a Political Symptom: Law and Regulation of Film Censorship

The main characteristic of film censorship regulation in Indonesia and Malaysia is “arbitrariness” or “irregularities” both in principle and application. Indonesian film director Nia Dinata says that dealing with film censorship is simply like “a kind of lottery” since filmmakers never know who are exactly members of the film censor board will judge and cut their films (Baumgärtel, 2012c, p.208). Furthermore, the ambiguity of film censorship guidelines provide the film censorship board members the interpretive power, while filmmakers left in the darkness in interpreting the guidelines. As is well known, the application of film censorship regulation is less fixed, but rather keeps evolving along with the dynamics of political regimes in Indonesia and Malaysia. Not surprisingly, a Malaysian independent filmmaker Amir Muhammad calls film censorship is a “political symptom” that it might be loose or strict depending on the nature of the political regime (personal interview, 7 January, 2012). In another occasion, he remarks, “I’m not surprised by censorship. I’m not like shocked whatever every time. I think it [film censorship] is always symptomatic. It is always very telling about a society. And this is taboo and this is not [...] So, censorship is always an indicator what is the most interesting about a society” (Festivalpuntevista, 2012). Therefore, this

section aims to illustrate the law and regulation of film censorship that are implicated in various controversies and protests against troubling films.

Despite Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid's (1999-2001) gesture toward the democratization of media when in 1999 he abolished the Department of Information, a New Order institution, its policy (film censorship) was not affected. Although pre-production censorship stage (censorship of film script) was eliminated, censorship of the finished film is still required for filmmakers who want to screen their films in major theatres. Moreover, while the Indonesian parliament has passed New Film Bill (*Undang-Undang Perfilman*) in 2009, the issue of film censorship was not very much changing substantially. In this new Film Bill, submitting films (including TV commercial) to the film censorship board is still compulsory and the board still has an authority to cut or reject film as well as TV commercial for screening although at the same time they also classify film based on audience's age.

Although film censorship policy was deeply rooted in the Dutch colonial regime, the national government of Indonesia preserves it with almost minor changes in terms of its purposes and method. In 1980s the members of the Indonesian film censorship board drew up its guideline for censorship in the Film Council's Code of Ethics (*Kode Etik Produksi Film Nasional*). This Film Council's Code of Ethics was modeled by eight commissions such as the commission for "film and national morality" (*film dan moral bangsa*), the commission of "film and the awareness of national discipline" (*film dan kesadaran disiplin nasional*) and the commission for "film and in its devotion towards the One and Only God" (*film dalam hubungannya dengan ketakwaan terhadap Tuhan Yang Maha Esa*).²⁷ The latter commission recommended all aspects of film should lead to the

²⁷ Interestingly, the total number of members of censor board in Indonesia is 45 in order to reflect the year of the Proclamation of Indonesian National Independence on 17 August 1945. Of course, this is seemingly based on the "national mythical number" (45) rather than the real need of staffs to handle the censoring task. Not surprisingly, due to the increasing number of film production, television programs and advertisements, the members of censor board complaint their workload,

devotion praise to God. In particular, “the storyline ought to be composed in such a way that it gives the audience the impression that what is bad will definitely be made to endure the consequences of its actions and suffer; that what is good will surely receive a reward and happiness” (as cited in Van Heeren, 2012, p.139). As a result, this made the most films in 1980s and 1990s had a similar pattern of good versus evil in which the good always triumphed. While it was not clearly stated in the Film Council’s Code of Ethics, the presence of religious figure (*kyai*) as a hero and other Islamic symbols had been a norm if not obligatory though sometimes its presence did not make any sense in the story.

Film censorship guidelines (*pedoman penyensoran*) as one of the sections in the Indonesian government regulation on the film censorship board (*Peraturan Pemerintah Republik Indonesia Nomor 7 Tahun 1994*) covers four domains: (1) religion (*keagamaan*); (2) ideology and politics (*ideologi dan politik*); (3) socio-cultural (*sosial budaya*); and (4) public order (*ketertiban umum*). It should be noted that religion occupies the first position in the aspect of film censorship. Regarding religious issue, any film should avoid some controversial issues as: giving an impression of anti-God and anti-religion in various forms and expression; disturbing an inter-religious harmony (*kerukunan antar-umat beragama*) in Indonesia; and undermining one of state-legalized religion in Indonesia. Moreover, the censors cannot pass any film if its story and scenes emphasize an anti-God attitude or discrediting one of state-legalized religions in Indonesia. Although the guideline mentions “religion” in general terms, it is easily associated with Islam since Islam is predominant (major) religion in Indonesia and most Indonesian film narrative mainly deals with Muslims rather than other religious groups.

Regarding socio-cultural matter, all films should consider to avoid steering audience sympathy to any amoral and evil acts as well as the wrongdoers. In particular,

as they need to work in the whole week (personal interview with Djamilul Abidin Ass, 4 November 2011).

all films should avoid some controversial issues such as: (1) endangering and violating social norms in Indonesia; (2) undermining or stirring up misunderstanding of local or ethnic customs in Indonesia; (3) providing misleading images of the socio-cultural conditions of Indonesia. Meanwhile, in relation to the public order matter, all films should not incite ethnic, religious, and racial and class hatred and persuade audiences to do unlawful acts. Interestingly, in order to maintain a social order, all films should not accentuate the sexual scenes and explain in details the modus operandi of criminal acts and persuade them to do those acts.

Although obviously Indonesian state regulates sexuality, the most important concern actually is security as formulated in four forbidden issues or commonly abbreviated as SARA: *suku* (ethnicity), *agama* (religion), *ras* (race) and *antar golongan* (class). Sexuality is specifically elaborated in the guideline of censorship under the rubric of socio-cultural tradition. Therefore, a film needs to be censored if it contradicts socio-cultural traditions in Indonesia such as: (1) a scene showing a man and woman in, or giving impression of nudity, whether it is from the front, side, or back angle; (2) a close-up of genitals, thighs, breasts, or buttocks, with or without clothing; (3) a sexually-arousing kiss between a heterosexual or homosexual couple' (4) the act, movement, or sound of intercourse, or anything else that gives the impression of intercourse, by human beings or animals, in any gestures, explicitly or implicitly; (5) an act of masturbation, lesbianism, homosexuality, or oral sex; (6) an act of giving birth, by human or animal, that can elicit desire; (7) a scene showing contraceptive tools that are irrelevant and inappropriate; (8) acts that give unethical impressions. It can be seen that "sexual orientation" (gay and lesbianism) as well as "reproduction" tend to be conflated into acts that can stimulate sexual desire. Interestingly, the natural reproduction activity in the animal kingdom is sexualized and deemed to arouse human desire.

Meanwhile, the new Film Censorship Guidelines (*Garis Panduan Penapisan Filem*), which replaced The Film Censorship Guidelines 1993, released by Division of Film Control and Enforcement (*Bagian Kawalan Filem dan Penguatkuasaan*), Ministry of Home Affairs (*Kementerian Dalam Negeri*) on 15 March 2010 declares that the guidelines will not act as a blockage to the filmmakers' creativity (*tidak menyekat kreativiti pembuat film*).²⁸ It also states that the application of the guidelines should allow the censorship of films in a transparent (*jelas*), fair (*adil*) and reasonable (*munasabah*) way. Furthermore, the Undersecretary Film Censorship and Enforcement Division, Tanasengran Sinnathambi, writes, "The guidelines were created with the effort to further clarify and promote understanding of film censorship guidelines to assist local art activists and film makers in producing high quality films without restricting their skills, scientific and critical thinking and creativity" (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2010, p.v). It seems that the new guidelines give films a certain level of flexibility and freedom without having to compromise on security, racial and religious harmony, socio-culture and values.

Unlike the previous ones, the new guidelines introduce a mechanism of "prior-censorship." As the Minister of Home Affairs, Datuk Seri Mahmood Adam says, "For the first time, scripts can be submitted to the Film Censorship Board before shooting, to be screened for offensive content so that changes can be made accordingly." ("New censorship guidelines," 2010) Surprisingly, film producer David Teo responded the new guidelines happily and he said, "It is a good system that allows us to remove any parts rather than having the parts removed at the censorship stage" ("New censorship guidelines," 2010). Another film director and producer, Datuk Yusof Haslam, praised the new movie ratings system in which allows more films to get approval for general

²⁸ The first stricter censorship guidelines introduced in Malaysia in 1974 resulted in the banning of a high number of feature films in 1975 as compared to 1970. In 1970, only 8 films from about 800 feature films were banned, as compared to the 80 out of over 900 feature films that were banned in 1974 (Grenfell as cited by Zahari, 1994).

viewing.²⁹ He also endorsed the new guidelines since there is a chance to submit the film script to the board and hence that any parts considered offensive can be changed before shooting begins. Of course, it can be argued that “prior-censorship” and “post-censorship” are simply two sides of the same coin as they assume that filmmakers are incapable to handle stories that critically evaluate some “sensitive” issues in Malaysia related to sexuality, race, religion and even royalty. Therefore, they need to seek an advice from the board of censors before started to make a film. Reflecting the current situations of film censorship in Malaysia, Zaharom Nain writes, “[We] need a ‘nanny’ to decide what is morally okay for us. A nanny, in most cases, who has very little background in the arts” (Nain, 2013, p.171).

In the appendix of the Film Censorship Guidelines (*Garis Panduan Penapisan Film*) document it can be seen clearly the list of individuals and institutions (organizations) that contribute in formulating the guidelines. Unlike previous Film Censorship Guidelines released in 1992, this new set of guidelines gives an impression that the formulation process of the guidelines was transparent and accessible to the public. This suggests that the guidelines have accommodated the diverse interests and aspirations of the many stakeholders in Malaysian film industry such as government agencies (*agensi kerajaan*), private companies (*syarikat swasta*) and other social and cultural institutions (*institusi-institusi*). As Home Ministry Secretary General Datuk Seri Mahmood Adam said, “What is special about the guideline is that it is drawn with the participation of the industry players, authorities and other interested parties. We are engaging in this open concept. This is not a rule set by the ministry and for others to follow. This is a set of rules which stakeholders had thrown ideas into.” (“New rules,”

²⁹ According to the new film censorship guidelines, all films can be rated into three categories: (1) **U** (general viewing for all ages as the film displays noble values and imparts positive messages and is entertaining); (2) **PG-13** (parental guidance suggested for children under 13 as the film has scenes of violence and horror); (3) **18** (accompanying adult required for those under 18 as the film contains elements of violence and sex yet are less excessive or may touch on aspects of religion, socio-culture and politics (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2010, p.25).

2009). Although various stakeholders were involved in the formulation of the censorship guidelines (as mentioned in the list), government representations were quite dominant. Surprisingly, while the Hindu community is represented by the *Malaysia Hindu Sangam* (Malaysian Hindu Organization), *Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia* (Section of the Islamic Development in Malaysia) is the only representative of Islamic institutions in Malaysia. However, the lists of contributors of the Guidelines do not reflect the dynamic process of formulation itself; hence, perhaps the texts on the Guidelines are the most accurate indicator of the influence of particular stakeholders.

Like many other censorship institutions in the world, the censorship board perceives itself to be the moral and national guardian of Malaysian society. Apart from safeguarding the racial harmony of Malaysian society, its other guiding principles are: (1) to protect society from the probability of being influenced to behave immorally and/or sympathize with ideologies contravening the principles of the *Rukun Negara* (national ideology) as a result of film viewing; (2) to protect Malaysia from the distribution of anti-government's image ridicule Malaysia's allied countries and their leaders; (3) to avoid films that depict wrong and deviationist teachings, criticize and humiliate religions that are permissible according to the federal constitution; (4) to become guidelines for the good conduct of society in conjunction with the national identity and aspirations; and to avoid the good name of an individual or association from being tarnished as a result of the showing the movie (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2010).

The guidelines of film censorship in Malaysia cover four main sensitive issues: (1) security and public order (*keselamatan dan ketentraman awam*); (2) religion (*keagamaan*); (3) social culture (*sosial budaya*); (4) decorum and morality (*ketertiban dan kesusilaan*). Although religion is only one of four issues here, it is quite elaborated in details compared to other three issues. As stipulated in the Film Censorship Guidelines,

particularly in the religion section, some religious matters should be given due attention and be scrutinized in-depth so as not to induce controversy and uncertainty among society (Film Censorship Act 2002). While there are 37 matters in relation to Islam, there are only 2 matters that bear relation to other non-Islamic religions. Moreover, we can still find another 36 religious matters related to the Islamic faith (*akidah*) and superstitions or belief in more than one God (*syirik*). In the section of issue of socio-culture even Islamic matters also can be found quite clearly.

Regarding Islamic matters, all films should consider and if possible avoid some controversial issues such as: (1) ridiculing or undermining of the purity of Islam (*kesucian Islam*); (2) opposing the Islamic principle laws (*akidah*), laws (*hukum*), and Islamic teachings (*ajaran Islam*); (3) opposing the opinion of the majority of Islamic religious scholar (*ulama*); (4) belittling and ridiculing the credibility and dignity of the religious leaders from respected sects especially the jurors (*mufti*); (5) ridiculing the credibility of the opinions of any the four major Islamic sects (Syafie, Hanafi, Maliki and Hambali) and the belief of Ahli Sunnah Wal Jamaah; (6) praising the advantages of conversion from Islam; (7) conducting non-Islamic rituals by the Muslim actor and so forth. These issues fundamentally related to problems of blasphemy, apostasy, and purity of Islamic teachings. More than merely protecting the purity of Islamic teachings, most importantly, the guidelines are also intended to protect the religious authorities from being criticized, opposed and ridiculed in the cinema. Moreover, there is a strong tendency in the guidelines to homogenize or singularize the Islamic belief (*akidah*) by expelling all pre-Islamic influences that are from the indigenous belief and practices. Therefore, some issues that should be considered are: (1) believing in a new prophet who follows after Muhammad; (2) declaring of a God revelation; (3) believing in the reincarnation of the dead to life; (4) exploiting verses of Quran for the sake of attracting public attention; and so on.

In relation to security and public order matters, several issues should be reconsidered and avoided such as: (1) opposing the principles of federalism and national ideology (*Rukun Negara*); (2) opposing constitutions violently; (3) undermining the sovereign state or ridiculing certain foreign countries; (4) celebrating the victory of crime over justice and truth; (5) using weapons violently against individual and a group of individuals; and so on.³⁰ Several matters related to anti-aristocracy, occultism, obscenity, sexuality (including homosexuality) and the like, categorized, as part of socio-cultural issues in the Guidelines, should be carefully reconsidered by filmmakers. Interestingly, in terms of the socio-cultural issues, attempts to protect against these un-Islamic acts in film such as depicting the male Muslim (as the main character) pierced (*memakai anting-anting*) and tattooed (*bertatu*), can still be found. Furthermore, any singing and dancing scenes in the front of mosque should be carefully reconsidered in order to avoid controversies and uncertainties among society. It should be noted the guidelines allow the representation of those issues aforementioned as long as it is followed by repentance and severe self-punishments. This clearly highlights not only the strong influence of Islamic values as a form of moral guidance in censorship practice, but also the important role of Islam in constituting the “morality” of Malaysian cinema in general and “moralist cinema” as is obviously found in the mission of so called “Islamic cinema.”

Meanwhile, regarding sexuality matters (as part of socio-cultural issue), the guidelines elaborate several scenes that should be avoided by filmmakers to prevent any controversies and uncertainties in society such as: behaviors or dialogs with sexual

³⁰ Interestingly, although the Malaysian censorship board purportedly considers the overall impact of a film on audience, in practice, their concerns are focused obsessively on “the superficial signifiers of decadent Westernization” (Khoo, 2006, p.110). For instance, there was a ban on showing men with long hair in film and television as nearly happened in Shuhami Baba’s actor Hattan in *Selubung*. This ruling stems from the association of long-haired male youth with rock bands that are stereotyped as immoral, anti-establishment, and at worst, satanic (Khoo, 2006, p.110).

connotations; sex scene (between male and female); exposing female body parts (breasts, buttocks and genitals); exposing male's genitals through transparent underwear; frontal nudity (both male and female); all lewd signs whether by using the fingers, hand or other parts of the body or by using an object; fondling in sexually provocative manners; passionate kissing on the mouth; erotic sounds; and paintings, pictures, posters, statues displaying sexual act (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2010, p.11-12). Clearly, this guidelines tend to regulate (control) female rather than male sexuality (body) as the guidelines shaped by the heterosexual normativity. Not surprisingly, there is bias or negative sentiment against homosexuality in the guidelines that disallows scene of homosexuals embracing in provocative manner and homosexual and unnatural sex scenes. Moreover, like the Indonesian censorship guidelines any scene of animals procreating deemed to arouse human desire rather than perceived as natural phenomenon in the animal kingdom. In other words, both animal and human sexuality are painted in a bad image and source of social anxiety.

It should be noted that although the new guidelines are intended to revise the Film Censorship Guidelines 1993, they are even more vague and convoluted than the previous ones (Saw, 2013, p.37). In addition, the censorship policy in Malaysia tend to be "*proscriptive* (must not show), rather than *prescriptive* (must show), which is to say censoring out rather than legislating what was to go into films" (Gray, 2010, p.128). Not surprisingly, the Guidelines do not provide for contentious content to be approved for exhibition and distribution if it is justified in the context of film as a whole (Saw, 2013, p. 74). As a result, if contentious element appears in the film, the scene containing such element must be altered or if possibly, the entire film itself will be refused approval for exhibition. Moreover, as the members of censor board only serve temporarily (four years), it is likely much of the censoring based on personal likes and dislikes.

Meanwhile, for Malaysian filmmakers, the consequences of misjudging the unclear guidelines may lead to cuts and financially ruinous ban.

The application of film guidelines, of course, is always arbitrary depending on the current political situations in which particular emphasis is given on certain issue. For instance, in a discussion on the future of Indonesian cinema held by film bloggers in Kemang (South Jakarta) on 25 November 2011,³¹ film director Ifa Isfansyah stated that now the members of film censorship board from the military representative more concerned with the conflict (tension) between “religion and society” rather than “military and society” like during the New Order era. Here Ifa shared his experience dealing with film censor board when he submitted his film *Sang Penari* (The Dancer, 2011) to the board. Adapted from Ahmad Tohari’s famous novel *Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk* (The Dancer from Paruk Village), *Sang Penari* dwells the romance between Rasmus (military officer) and Srintril (traditional Ronggeng dancer) set against the backdrop of political turbulence and mass killing in 1965-1966. Surprisingly, although *Sang Penari* depicts the military’s involvement in mass killing, the military representative in the film censor board did not express any objection against this film. Rather, they asked to the film producer/ filmmaker to cut out a long erotic scene between two protagonists, Rasmus and Srinthil. While some critics deplored that *Sang Penari* has an unclear political stand against the mass killing in 1965-1966, it might be the best way to reach out the young audience without an obvious political message and invite any censorious act (personal interview with Shanty Harmayn, 16 December 2011).

Considering film censorship regulation, most filmmakers from both in Indonesia and Malaysia choose themes and narratives in order to conform to the film censorship

³¹ I attended this meeting during my fieldwork in Jakarta from 2 October to 29 December 2011. There were about 30 people attended the meeting. In this meeting, I met some bloggers who mostly wrote film reviews (both Indonesian and foreign films) on their blogs and they claimed that they were “movie freaks” or “cinephiles” and kept abreast with the development of Indonesian cinema. Besides Ifa Isfansyah, the other speakers were Oka Antara (actor) and Andibachtiar Yusuf (film director).

guidelines. Since film censorship is also a “symptom” of the conditions of political regimes, it is unpredictable and precisely mirroring the dynamics of power relations among conflicting factions in the government thereby the government is totally hegemonic regime (interview with Amir Muhammad, 7 January 2012). Not surprisingly, in order to boost the image of democratic regime, in 2011 the Malaysian government proposed an idea of self-regulatory mechanism in film industry in which people in film industry will review and classify their films rather than submitting to the film censorship board. Of course, there were two opposing views among people in the film industry. Some were skeptical to the government’s proposal and thought it was only political gimmick from Najib Razak’s administration to paint an image as a democratic and liberal government. Others were quite optimistic that the proposal was a positive gesture of the government in deepening the democratization process in Malaysia. In fact, this proposal has not been materialized and ended up simply as another form of political rhetoric filled with empty promises.

Resistance Against Film Censorship: “Politicizing” Film Scene

Given the impossibility of total hegemony of film censorship regulation, there are always many spaces for resistance (from filmmakers/ producers or public) though these might seem small and limited. Such resistances against film censorship regulations may manifest as an open protest or subtle humor (parody and irony) with different degree of success to affect the regulations. In a legalistic way, the resistance can be a demand for judicial review of film censorship regulation. Meanwhile, in a more artistic or symbolic way, humor (parody and irony) may play an important role in infusing social criticisms and exposing social/political taboos subtly. The emergence of political (legalistic) and symbolic (artistic) resistance suggests that filmmakers and public are not totally passive, but rather keep pushing the boundaries of the acceptable and the unacceptable in

cinematic representations. Moreover, resistance against film censorship can be understood as a disruption to “police order” (in Rancièrian term), which imposes particular way of seeing, hearing and perceiving social reality to the people. Hence, in a Rancièrian perspective, politics can come about only by opposing a given police order. In other words, politics happens when the logic of “police order” is wholly challenged by the other logic like equality as reflected in the resistance against film censorship. In contrast, the protests from some social and religious conservative groups toward critical films or endorsement to film censorship reflect the acceptance of “police order” as a “natural” (reasonable) form of governance by dividing society unequally between who knows the best for society and who do not know and sustaining an oligarchic structure within society in terms judging the impacts of film.

Since *Reformasi* brought an open political climate in Indonesia, people in the film world started questioning the legitimacy of state film censorship. While the *Reformasi* witnessed the emergence of religious conservative groups that urged for strict application of film censorship, some young Indonesian filmmakers, producers and creative workers aspired for reforming film industry. It should be noted that unlike other media regulations (print media and television) in Indonesia that have undergone a reformation process, film regulation was less reformed and almost unchanged since the early 1990s. This was partly because the policy makers (government and parliamentary members) felt less pressure from the public through open mass protests to reform law and regulations on film censorship. Another possible reason was people in the film industry were less interested in struggling for more democratic film regulations and too occupied with film production activities. Therefore, the movement initiated by people in the film scene to question the legitimacy of the existence of film censorship has politicized film scene as a site for political struggle for not only an artistic freedom as a

citizen but also made the film scene part and parcel of the larger process of democratization in Indonesia.

Starting from the protests against the decision of the winner of the best film in the Indonesian Film Festival (FFI) in 2006, some young filmmakers and later other concerned people in film scene expand their demand for the total reformation in film industry. As a symbol of protest, filmmakers, actors, critics and other creative workers in the film industry returned their FFI awards (*piala Citra*), while about 200 people both directly and indirectly involved in the film scene signed a petition to support. Although initially the protest against the stealing of music score of Korean film *Taegukgi* (dir. Kang Je-gyu, 2004) by the best film of FFI *Ekskul* (dir. Nayato Fio Nuala, 2006), the protest later transformed into a long-term struggle to reform Indonesian film policy. As part of the struggle, The Indonesian Film Society (*Masyarakat Film Indonesia* or MFI) urged the government to abolish the outdated film censorship regulation that it is regarded no longer relevant to the newfound democratic climate and contradicts to the human rights' law. MFI brought their demand to the Constitutional Court (*Mahkamah Konstitusi*, MK) to abolish the outdated Regulation no.8 /1992 (*Peraturan Pemerintah RI Nomor 8 Tahun 1992 tentang Lembaga Sensor Film*). The proposal was made by actress Anissa Nurul Shanty K, film director Muhammad Rivai Riza (Riri Riza), film producer Nur Kurniati Aisyah Dewi (Nia Dinata) and film organizer Rois Amriradhiani. Although finally MK rejected the MFI's demand in April 2008, this is the first movement in Indonesia since the 1998 *Reformasi* that brought film censorship regulation to be criticized publicly based on the principles in Indonesian constitution. In addition, the MFI movement has made Indonesian cinema a political issue rather than merely a matter of entertainment business.

According to Paramadhita (2012, p.81), "The case of *MFI vs. the Censorship Board* can be read as an opposition between the new generation of Indonesian filmmakers and

enduring state paternalism, which imagines the nation as childlike, uncritical, and enlightened.” This is understandable because in making their case in the Constitutional Court, MFI members argue that censorship prevents people from seeing the reality and hence it is “fooling” (*membodohi*) the society. The notion of *bodoh* (stupid) and *pembodohon* (dumbing down) often came up in the early years of *Reformasi* as a critique toward the New Order’s lies and propaganda to keep people unaware of its crime. One of MFI witnesses, Fadjoel Rahman, a socialist activist, states that maintaining censorship in the post-dictatorship period is similar to the ways in which Suharto restricted access to information and “understanding of national history” (cited in Paramadhita, 2012, p.81). Of course, MFI is aware that censorship is grounded on the persisting paternalistic logic that views how “the nation is not mature enough to protect itself” (Paramadhita, 2012, p.82). “Intellectual capacity” and “freedom to choose” are major key terms used by MFI against the Censorship Board’s rhetoric of limiting and protecting or controlling. Rather than censorship that cut off the film, MFI suggested that the state use the law for consumer protection (UU no.9/1999), which allows the audience/ consumer to gain access to information as well as to develop themselves as autonomous consumers capable to protecting themselves. Another MFI’s proposal was to urge the government use a classification (rating) system based on age group which protects children for consuming inappropriate materials but provides the adult consumers a right to choose a film they want to watch. However, the final decision of the Constitutional Court regarding judicial review of the 1992 Film Bill (including film censorship regulation) in April 2008 stated that an institution to review a film before it is released, set by government and film community, is still needed to ensure that the distributed film does not disrupt or disadvantage other people’s right. This Constitutional Court’s decision signals that film is still subject to control (censor) and perceived have an unpredictable impact on society if it remains without any restrictions.

It should be noted that the anti-censorship movement led by MFI was unsuccessful in mobilizing massive support from other civil society organizations in Indonesia. This movement was probably too “parochial” and lacked a network with strategic political alliances. Although the Constitutional Court’s conclusion in 2008 stated that the present film law, including the film censorship board, was not adequate for the contemporary situation and a new law was needed, the new Film Bill passed by the parliament in 2009 had the same clause of film censorship. As the leading film director Garin Nugroho remarked, “It was because the film industry was not unified in monitoring its deliberation at the House of Representatives that the law was passed in the first place.” He added, “Therefore, the movie community must now be more united in fighting the law. We should learn from the group of civil organizations that stood solidly together and succeeded in preventing the controversial state secrecy bill from being passed. The anti-secrecy coalition at least has 10 major civil organizations” (“Filmmakers,” 2009). Nevertheless, one of the activists of MFI, Tino Saroenggalo remarked that the political significance of this movement is in how people in the film industry brought up the issue of film censorship through a legal avenue (personal interview, 18 November 2011).

Meanwhile, responding to the banning of his film *Lelaki Komunis Terakhir* (The Last Communist, 2006), Amir Muhammad made a documentary of interviews with some members of parliament both from Malaysian ruling parties and oppositional parties and the Minister of Culture Dato’ Rais Yatim after attending a special film screening at the FINAS theater. Previously, he appealed the decision of the ban of *Lelaki Komunis Terakhir* (as well as his other next film *Apa Khabar Orang Kampung/ The Village People Radio Show*), but his appeal was rejected. He then wrote an article on his blog entitled “Why is *Lelaki Komunis Terakhir* Banned in Malaysia?”, explaining the chronology of the ban and making some speculation about possible reasons for the banning of his film albeit it

passing uncut by the censors and rated “U” (suitable for all ages) (Muhammad, 2006). There were 141 comments to Amir Muhammad’s post on his blog condemning the ban and encouraging him to continue filmmaking. For instance, one commentator writes, “Admire your courage Amir. But this is Malaysia. They could ban anything without even looking at the content.” Another commentator praises Amir Muhammad’s effort and writes, “It’s good to see that there are people like Amir and Yasmin who are proud to be Malaysian, and do play along the racial lines. With *Berita Harian* seemingly promoting Bangsa Melayu not Bangsa Malaysia, I feel pity for other races who love the country. Like a quote from Yasmin’s film *Gubra*, it felt like loving someone without being loved back. But with the existence of such people like Yasmin and Amir, we have hope.” Recounting the ban of his documentary six years later, Amir Muhammad says, “It is the first film ever to be banned. This doesn’t say that the film is very daring, but that other film people must have tried very hard to self-censor to avoid offending. I therefore think that this became a kind of absurdity in its own way to the point that people criticize something that is absent. I think the banning says a lot about Malaysia and, in a sense, it’s part of the film” (Cazarro, 2012, p.239-240). The documentary on the reactions later was included in Amir Muhammad’s compilation *6horts* as an extra and eventually was uploaded to YouTube. By distributing the video through DVD stores and exhibiting the video online, it seems Amir wanted to open up more public discussions and debates surrounding the ban of his film. At the same time, he has shown some unjustifiable arguments as well as dissenting opinions toward the ban of his film. Unfortunately, Amir did not document the reactions of public or other social groups in Malaysia. While what Amir has done probably received less public attention in Malaysia compared to the resistance of MFI in Indonesia, the wide distribution through the Internet may provide a glimpse of the state of contemporary film censorship in Malaysia to a global audience.

The public resistance against film censorship in Malaysia sometimes comes from unexpected sources. Facilitated by the rampant video (film) piracy in Malaysia, the full version of Malaysian films released overseas in digital format like Yasmin Ahmad's *Sepet* are able to penetrate Malaysian "semi-legal" market. In an interview late Yasmin Ahmad recounts, "[So] the public saw all of *Sepet* on pirated DVD, despite the censorship. And people were saying: Why did they censor this film? That was stupid! It came out on the Internet and on TV. And with my subsequent film, they became less strict with me because it became pretty obvious that the public had no problems with the way Malaysia was portrayed in my movies" (Baumgärtel, 2012b, p.250). Indeed, amidst the rampant film piracy in Malaysia, film censorship is almost inadequate to prevent film audiences for watching banned and censored films. This is because they can watch various films (including some local controversial films) out of the control of film censor board, particularly some uncut versions of local films released by the overseas film distributors.

Since there is no statutory right of Malaysian film practitioners to make oral representation before the Appeal Committee at the appeal stage of censorship process, it would appear to deprive them of an opportunity to be heard to justify the contentious elements or portrayals in their film that censors found objectionable. Not surprisingly, any open resistance against film censorship is almost absent in the Malaysian film scene. However, some film producers and filmmakers always try to test the limits of film censorship due to the inconsistency (arbitrariness) of the implementation of film censorship guidelines.³² A perfect example of a provocative and daring film perhaps is

³² In an interview with the Australian media, the head of Malaysia's Film Censorship Board (LPF), Dato Mohammed Hussain Shafie, states, "*Dalam Botol* has a theme of homosexuality. But then what had been portrayed is different with what had been portrayed in *Brokeback Mountain* because in *Dalam Botol* that is happened in the background. And finally that couple made a wrong decision with that" (ABC News for Australia Network, 2011). In contrast, the Youth Wing of Islamic party PAS, Dr Mohammed Zuhdi stated that although the film has passed the film censor board, the issue brought by the film is not allowable in terms of Islamic teaching. Using

Khair Rahman's directorial debut *Dalam Botol* (an original title was "Anu Dalam Botol" or "Penis in a Bottle", 2011) as it has been dubbed as "Malaysia's first gay-themed movie."³³ Although the ending of this film tends to affirm the heterosexual normativity (heteronormativity) as prescribed by film censorship guidelines, *Dalam Botol* has brought successfully homosexuality as an alternate lifestyle and sexual identity into Malaysian cinema. According to a transgender rights campaigner, Yuki Choe, despite the premise that *Dalam Botol* is totally against the aspirations of gay and transgender people since it insults their identity, it shows the "human side" of gay and transgender people rather than depicting them as a target of ridicule as in the past (ABC News for Australia Network, 2011). Choosing a transsexual (transgender) as controversial subject of her film, film producer Raja Azmi Raja Sulaiman remarks, "What is life without controversy? When there is controversy, I find life boring. But I do not look for controversy. I do not aim to be controversial. In fact, controversy comes looking for me" (Bissme, 2009, para. 19). Furthermore, asked if *Dalam Botol* would be banned, Raja Azmi says, "I will fight to lift the ban. I will go to the court if I have to.... Nobody should stop me to expressing myself. I am not doing pornography" (Bissme, 2009, para. 8). This bold attitude of film producer to defend her film against film censorship is quite interesting since not many filmmakers/ producers (except Amir Muhammad and his producer) attempt to appeal the film censors' decision although it is legally allowed by film censorship regulation in Malaysia.

In the less overtly political in approach, irony and parody are strategies for circumventing censorship in Malaysia (Khoo, 2006, p.111). Khoo Gaik Cheng suggests that by looking the use of irony and parody, we can find class critique. For instance, some comedies featuring A.R. Badul such as *Si Badul* (1979), *Jejaka Perasaan* (1986), and

"sexual action" is very much forbidden in Islam and it will encourage the audience to follow (copy) that action (ABC News for Australia Network, 2011).

³³ See chapter Three for a detailed analysis of the story of *Dalam Botol*.

Tuan Badul (1979-1980) usually champion the poor over the rich while criticizing the corruption and lechery of the wealthy (including the New Malay or 'Melayu Baru'). In the contemporary context, Mamat Khalid opts to make a comedy film in order to insert social comments and circumvent film censorship. Mamat's commercially successful film *Hantu Kak Limah Balik Rumah* cleverly makes a twist in the end of the story by revealing the true identity of Kak Limah (main character) as a fugitive patient from the asylum instead of a ghost as many people of her village believed. By doing this, he cannot be accused by the conservative Muslim group of propagating un-Islamic (superstitious) belief. At the same time, he made fun of strict beliefs within Muslim community. According to Mamat Khalid, the beauty of film lies in its potent social critique in which audiences can easily understand the film message through humor. Hence, it would be better to make "comedy film" (*film lucu*) rather than "obscene film" (*film lucu*) (personal interview, 19 February 2012). However, there is no guarantee that irony and parody are effective to launch social criticism and resist film censorship, as the messages are too symbolic or unclear and potentially tend to trivialize the urgency of social issues.

Due to the spirit of *Reformasi* (democratization) and the diminishing state hegemony, resistance against film censorship in Indonesia takes bold form as a demand for judicial review of the Film Bill, which was preceded by the protest against the winner of the government sponsored film festival (*Festival Film Indonesia* or FFI). Although the demand for judicial review was unsuccessful to alter or amend film censorship regulation, it has led to the birth of a new Film Bill in 2009 and made people in the film scene aware of the close relationship between film and politics. Meanwhile, in Malaysia resistance takes a symbolic (artistic) path through cinematic representations due to a lack of unity among filmmakers to demand for reforming film censorship regulation. As Malaysian film producer Raja Azmi Raja Sulaiman stated, "I [also] find our film industry is not united. Everyone is worried about their own rice bowl" (Bissme, 2009, para.25).

Therefore, rather than collective resistance against film censorship, an individual resistance is more prominent in Malaysia. For instance, Amir Muhammad makes a documentary of both intelligent and unintelligent responses of politicians from ruling and oppositional parties after they attended a special screening of his banned film. He then included the documentary into his DVD compilation as well as uploaded it to his YouTube channel in order to reach wider public responses. In a slightly different way, film director Mamat Khalid employs humor (parody and satire) in his films to circumvent film censorship while film director Khir Rahman tackles sensitive issues as a way to push the limits of film censorship. In addition, the rampant film/ video piracy in Malaysia has facilitated the circulation of pirated DVDs of uncut versions of banned or controversial films released by foreign distributors that makes film censorship virtually meaningless.

Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated the way in which cinema has sparked a multitude of public reactions and protests, which paradoxically marked the democratization processes in Malaysia and Indonesia since *Reformasi*. Multiple controversies, protests and subsequent acts of censorship signal the persistence of censorious power within society despite the proliferation of democratic spaces due to political changes in Indonesia and Malaysia. Moreover, recent social censorships gained new ground as it prevented particular films from being produced through protests against filmmakers who announced in the mass media their intention to make a film. Particularly, in the Indonesian context, religious as well as anti-communist (usually associated with anti-Islamic) sentiments have constantly been mobilized to hold protests and even demand the banning of films from being produced. Indeed, this trend can be interpreted as a setback to the conditions of freedom of expression after the political changes in 1998 and

it prevents filmmakers from exploring and exposing many hidden problems in society. More importantly, it may lead to a dominant monolithic interpretation of religion and history in Indonesia, which is anachronistic in an open political climate. In the Malaysian context, the controversial filmmakers' past has been used to question the genuine motive of the filmmaker and as a pretext to demand the banning of their films.

Taking into account several controversies and protests and the evolution of film censorship guidelines, this chapter suggests that Islam has increasingly been a moral standard or "moral compass" for the practices of state and social censorship in Malaysia and Indonesia. At the same time, filmmakers and moderate Muslims use Islamic teachings as part of their argument to support more democratic and egalitarian society. In the Malaysian context, the importance of Islamic morality in the practices of censorship is inseparable from the intensification of the Islamization process in which the Malaysian government attempts to construct the single model of Islamicity and the Muslim subject in concert with the Malay identity (Malayness). Likewise, in the Indonesian context, Islamization through societal rather than state-sponsored processes shapes the monolithic Muslim subject by eliminating the pluralism of Muslim practices as well as religious pluralism in Indonesia. At the same time, Indonesia has experienced the rise of radical Islam as exemplified by the emergence of various Islamist groups and political parties demanding Islam be more visible in national affairs. Meanwhile, the persistence of censorious forces have incited many forms of resistances as manifestation of the spirit of active citizens to uphold democratic values such as pluralism, toleration and freedom of expression. While any attempts or movement to resist against both state and social film censorship still need to broaden strategic political alliances and more endurance, cinema has been a new site for political contestation to carve vast democratic terrains.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

*[C]inema is a movement from love to politics,
whereas theatre is a movement from politics to love.*

Alain Badiou (2013, p.215).

Encouraged by the political upheavals since *Reformasi* in 1998, this thesis examined the intricate and co-constitutive relationship between cinema and politics within a fast changing socio-political landscape of contemporary Indonesia and Malaysia. By applying an “inter-referencing” method this thesis delineated the complex structure of film practices, alternative network and circulation, multiple social meanings, social struggles and various responses to contemporary Indonesian and Malaysian cinema in order to discern a new visual politics in these two countries. This thesis showed that contemporary Indonesian and Malaysian cinemas significantly become a site for social imaginings of a just, ethical and egalitarian society amidst the arduous socio-political transformations which extend access to equality and transgress any institutionalized social injustices despite the heightening moral force, widening social cleavages, despairing authoritative regime in both countries. In this final chapter, I provide an overview how empirical findings presented in the previous chapters may contribute to a better understanding of the remaking of Indonesian and Malaysian society through manifold film practices and their implication for further research on cinema in Southeast Asia.

This thesis opened with an illustration of the proliferation of amateur and independent (indie) filmmaking aided by digital technology, which subsequently became an impetus for the birth of “new generation” in Indonesian and Malaysian

cinema. With well-educated backgrounds, technologically savvy and ethnically diverse, this “new generation” of filmmakers have played a pivotal role in commencing an audio-visual movement in which they creatively explored and experimented with many possibilities of cinematic narratives in order to de-familiarize the everyday life and articulated some pertinent issues in society in order to reconstruct a social imaginary beyond the existing socio-political conditions. Using the advantages of digital technology, many film activists and communities organize grass root and independent film festivals as well as other film events to revitalize film culture which has been diminishing along with the declining number of film theatres due to the popularity of television and rampant film/video piracy. Despite creating a culture of cinephilia, the rampant film/video piracy in Indonesia and Malaysia has opened up more access for aspiring indie filmmakers to global art films (which are hardly available in the market or screened at the commercial film theaters) in order to expand their cinematic references. Meanwhile, the rise of Internet as an open platform not only helps to circumvent the oligopolistic commercial film distribution and exhibition structure, it also provides a political space to articulate some “sensitive” issues such as race/ethnicity, religion and sexuality as subject to film censorship in Indonesia and Malaysia.

As discussed particularly in Chapter Three and Four, through cinematic images and gestures, Indonesian and Malaysian filmmakers have made visible and audible those who had been marginalized, discriminated and uncounted within a plural society such as non-*pribumi/bumiputera* (ethnic Chinese and Indians); religious minorities/ non-Muslims (Christians, Catholics and Buddhist); sexual minorities (*mak nyahs*, *waria* and homosexuals); slum dwellers; and people from the peripheral areas (Bajonese, Medanese and Kelantanese). By articulating the minority or marginal groups visually and auditory, Indonesian and Malaysian filmmakers not only make the visible of the “invisible” and “inaudible” within a whole society or, using Rancièrian term, “the part who have no

part” (the count of the uncounted), in a visual sense, but also actively intervene into the reigning discourses and disrupt the “police order” (in Rancièrean term) as a way of determining the order of appearance or what can be apprehended by the senses. For instance, as Islamic-themed films, *3 Doa 3 Cinta* (2008), *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban* (2009) and *2 Alam* (2010) have attempted to carve out a possible space for pluralism within predominantly conservative Muslim community in Indonesia and Malaysia. Likewise, transgressing the heteronormative sexuality, *Renita Renita* (2007), *Pecah Lobang* (2008), *Lovely Man* (2011) and *Dalam Botol* (2011) have offered an imagery of the alternative sexuality and sexual identity in a morally conservative society. Meanwhile, inherited from the colonial racial policy, the racialized (ethnicized) landscapes in *Love Conquers All* (2006), *Chalanggai* (2007) and *CINTA* (2010) have been altered by their filmmakers to be a viable “trans-ethnic” or “post-ethnic” spaces within limited existing spaces in two countries to articulate a democratic equality among citizens regardless their religious and ethnic backgrounds. Moreover, in *Jermal* (2009), *Mirror Never Lies* (2009), *Wayang* (2008), *Wayang Rindukan Bayang* (2011) and *Bunohan* (2011), peripheral spaces become a site not only for preserving local culture, tradition, and cultural heritage in a new way, but also sharing an alternative knowledge. In other words, contemporary Indonesian and Malaysian cinemas distribute the social and political sensibilities to forge new subjectivities and expand the horizon of political possibilities. Moving beyond Krishna Sen’s (1995) landmark study on the role of Indonesian New Order cinema in “ordering” society through textual and institutional instruments and Khoo Gaik Cheng’s (2006) study on the complicit of Malay(sian) cinema to state and self censorships and its denial in portraying social realities, my thesis suggests the role of cinema in constructing images and gestures lead to changes and in helping insert alternative imaginings of Indonesian and Malaysian society amidst the precarious socio-political changes since *Reformasi*.

In Chapter Five, however, I have illustrated various responses or reactions to alternative and powerful cinematic representations of race, religion, sexuality and history as manifested in many controversies and protests. Demanding more strict application of film censorship and enforcing more rigid morality, some “moralist” and Islamist groups operating outside state censorship exercise their power to control cinema. In this regard, a conservative interpretation of Islamic morality has surfaced on the protests as well as controversies over cinema. Furthermore, Islamic morality defines what is acceptable and unacceptable, polices the visible and suppresses the invisible in cinematic representations to maintain moral order and sustain moral authority. While the Islamist groups in Indonesia and Malaysia become the new political agencies in the field of cinema claiming as a guardian of public morality and contesting the role of state film censorship, other social groups (including moderate Islamic groups) and filmmakers Indonesia and Malaysia that promote freedom of expression and civil rights challenged them. However, those various reactions to cinema can be understood as an evidence of the potent cinematic imageries in shaping people’s view of their society, and, at the same time, any attempt to imagine a desirable society is always incomplete due to various challenges from the state and some parts of society.

By employing an “inter-referencing” method to the spread of digital technology along with its unprecedented consequences, the same cohort of “new generation” of (digital) filmmakers, and the same route of the struggle for a truly plural and democratic society in contemporary Indonesian and Malaysian film scene, this thesis yielded some interesting findings in which two countries shared similar issues yet shaped by different factors or contexts. For instance, the emergence of new generation of digital filmmakers in Malaysia partly as an outcome of the investment on digital technology and infrastructures by the Malaysian government, while Indonesian digital filmmakers were born due to self-learning process from their immediate multimedia milieu rather than

facilitated by the government policy. Currently, both Indonesian and Malaysian society face the same problem of crisis of religious and ethnic pluralism as clearly articulated in compelling filmic imageries of contemporary cinema of both countries. Whereas the crisis of pluralism in Malaysia stirred up by the Malay supremacist politics at the national level along with extreme right social groups, in Indonesia the crisis of pluralism caused by the indecisive state's stance against religious conservative groups, which are increasingly intolerant to differences and enforcing particular religious view to other groups. Recurring controversies and protests against troubling films both in Indonesia and Malaysia caused by different factors in these two countries. The intensification of societal Islamization in Indonesia has encouraged the appearance of Islam in public and infused Islamic morality in social life. Meanwhile, as an outcome of complex bureaucratization of Islam by the Malaysian state through establishment many state-sponsored Islamic organizations and institutionalization of Syariah (Islamic) court, Islamization in Malaysia has been responsible for creating monolithic Islamicity (in tandem with construction of singular Malayness) as model of (national) morality.

Admittedly, five chapters of my thesis are less than comprehensive in capturing the vast array of contemporary Indonesian and Malaysian cinemascapes. Moreover, given an acute problem of film archive and documentation in Indonesian and Malaysian cinema, this thesis mostly focuses on recent films rather than some films in the early years of the *Reformasi*. However, this did not significantly affect the value of this study since the most interesting and significant development of Indonesian and Malaysian cinema occurred in the last seven years (2004-2011) rather than in the early years of the *Reformasi* (1998-2003), when indie filmmakers started making features after honing their crafts in shorts filmmaking. In addition, this thesis neither examined the rise of the production of animation films nor experimental films or video arts. In addition, although I have examined two advocacy-oriented films such as *Renita Renita* (2007) and

Pecah Lobang (2008) in Chapter Three, they are far from representative to illustrate the plethora of filmmaking in conjunction with social activism initiated both by social activists and indie filmmakers in Indonesia and Malaysia. In particular, various forms of documentary films (creative, observational, explanatory or ethnographic), which started flourishing since the *Reformasi* in Indonesia and Malaysia, are inadequately covered in this thesis. In the course of my research and writing process those issues are too broad to be included into this thesis without sacrificing the main focus of my thesis; hence, they deserve for separate studies.

Nonetheless, given the evidence of my investigation, Indonesian and Malaysian cinemas are a potent agency in reconstructing the imagined society rather than simply a product/outcome of socio-political changes in two countries. In the larger context of ongoing struggles for a truly democratic society in Southeast Asia, cinema plays a pivotal role in proliferating the possibility of imagining society since it is capable to reconfigure the sensible that is governed by the "police order." Not surprisingly, cinema unavoidably sparks controversies and resistances particularly from the state and religious conservative groups due to perceived effects to disturb social norms and moral order. At the same time, cinema becomes a site for visibility of any hidden subjects/taboo as well as an avenue for projecting a social imagination. Therefore, the central role of cinema in developing societies like Indonesia and Malaysia within a Southeast Asian context is to create conditions for visibility of the "uncounted" subjects in terms of religious belief, ethnicity, gender, sexuality and social class. The absence of any condition for visibility will heighten the repressive and dominating nature of the "police order" since the "part who have no part" become a constant object of marginalization and discrimination due their invisibility and their less equal position within a social arrangement. In this regard, cinema is a witness of human presence regardless their class, ethnicity, religion, and sexuality that have ability to make their own choice and

embody unalienable rights. This precisely echoes the meaning of “politics” in a Rancièrian term as a “political part-taking” or an “act of appearance,” an ability to provide explicitness of the presence of any subject within a particular social arrangement with an egalitarian presupposition. It should be noted that making visible could not be automatically translated into “identity politics,” which is based on the claim of particular identity traits or essence, since becoming visible should be based on equality for everyone and anyone.

As previously explained, Indonesian and Malaysian cinemas not simply reflect socio-political conditions, but rather they project a “coming democratic society.” However, the term “coming” should not be interpreted that the democratic society is unattainable or unrealizable; “coming” is not a deferral into the future. Rather, the democratic society implies an ongoing struggle for equality and freedom regardless their social and cultural identities. There are many challenges for Indonesian and Malaysian cinema to fantasize a “democratic society” completely as they may disrupt the unjust and exploitative social structure that might serve the interest of state and religious conservative groups. In this context, cinema making an imagined democratic society remains open for everyone to live in rather than imposing a particular imagining for everyone. As a popular medium, cinema allows for creating a sense of collectivism (an anonymous “we”) and forges a collective dream or social imagination that invites everyone to equally participate in a democratic social arrangement.

Overall, this thesis has shed light on the new visual politics in the tremendous socio-political changes in Indonesia and Malaysia in which cinema has created conditions of political possibilities aided by digital technology coupled with its complex infrastructures or networks. Although many forms of cultural politics can be found in many previous studies, this study highlights the crucial position of cinema in contemporary Indonesian and Malaysian society since making, diffusing and consuming

images define the subjectivities and imagining of contemporary society. In particular, “politics becomes cinematic” in which social reality was increasingly transformed into images and gestures while everyday experiences were judged against their cinematic counterparts. Most importantly, this study may provide a more nuanced understanding of contemporary Indonesian and Malaysian cinemas that re-arranges the sphere of distribution of social and political sensibilities, particularly during the tumultuous times brought about by the *Reformasi*.

My analysis of cinematic connections between Indonesia and Malaysia suggests the promise of inter-referencing analysis of Southeast Asian cinemas for future research rather than traditional research that focuses on an individual country in this region. More studies with an inter-referencing method not only will create balanced film studies in Southeast Asia, but also offer a more nuanced understanding of the unique characteristics of cinema in this region. In addition, applying an “inter-referencing” method will help to develop various cultural registers in order to conduct a more meaningful study of Southeast Asian cinemas, particularly to unravel their connection with other Asian cinemas as well as Euro-American cinema. Indeed, the inevitable connection between cinema and various forms of digital media, which shapes the nature of contemporary cultural politics of Southeast Asian society, may open up a new and fascinating research in the future. The development so-called “post-cinematic” technologies (Shaviro, 2010) in the 21st century marked by the rise of interactivity, gaming, multimedia and the proliferation of different Internet platforms are hugely informed by cinematography rather than perpetuating a “crisis in cinema” as many predicted. Since the advancement of technology is a backbone of cinema, the revolutionary development of “post-cinematic” technologies will broaden transformative power of cinema as well as shape new cultural politics in Southeast Asia. However, in studying the digital technology, one should take into account the local

socio-political contexts, as the diffusion of technology is inseparable from the government policy and social dynamics.

Postscript

Current film scene both in Indonesia and Malaysia is quite dynamic and vibrant marked by advancing film technology, emerging new talents, flourishing film themes and genres. However, particular theme still endures like religious and ethnic pluralism that always incite controversy and protest in Indonesia and Malaysia's plural societies. For instance, Hestu Saputra and Hanung Bramantyo's *Cinta Tapi Beda* (Love but Different, 2012), an interreligious and interethnic romance between a Catholic Minang woman and a Javanese Muslim man, has created furors and protests of three ethnic-based organizations due to misrepresentation of ethnic Minang (West Sumateran) who are mostly Muslim ("Hanung Bramantyo," 2013). They also protested at the scene in which the woman said that her favorite dish was spicy pork, which is forbidden for Muslims ("Cinta Tapi Beda," 2013). Likewise, Namewee's *Kara King* (2013) has drawn the ire of UMNO mouthpiece *Utusan Malaysia* for scene the Chinese lead character urinates on a Malay couple passing by on motorcycle. This scene was perceived as a blatant attempt by Namewee to disdain for the Malay community ("Namewee's Kara King," 2013). *Kara King* tells the story of a Hong Kong singer whose wife has mysteriously disappeared and how he copes with life after that while raising his two children in a small town in Malaysia.

Another theme like Indonesian and Malaysian history has attracted some filmmakers to pickup a camera. After more than 63 years of the production of first "Indonesian" film *Darah dan Do'a* (The Long March, dir. Usmar Ismail, 1950), two biopics on the first Indonesian president Sukarno finally released: *Sukarno: Indonesia Merdeka!* (Soekarno: Free Indonesia! dir. Hanung Bramantyo, 2013) and *Ketika Bung di Ende* (When

Bung [Soekarno] in *Ende*, dir. Viva Westi, 2013). Supported by the Department of Culture and Education of Indonesia, Viva Westi's film was less controversial. On the contrary, Bramantyo's film induced controversy and even led to a legal problem involving Sukarno's family due to historical accuracies and creative interpretation of the film director of Sukarno's personal life. In other words, Indonesian filmmakers participate in the continuing "battle for history" (Van Klinken, 2005) since the collapse of Suharto's New Order regime in which history did not belong to historians alone and various alternative histories proliferated with much less controlled by state censors. Meanwhile, a biopic of Malaysian founding fathers in *Tanda Putera* (Incurable Heroes, dir. Shuhaimi Baba, 2013) and docudrama of the resettlement during the Malayan Emergency in *New Village* (dir. Wong Kew-Lit, 2013) has sparked controversy over the portrayal of racial riots on 13 May 1969 and the communist activism during the Malayan Emergency.

The above phenomena in the Indonesian and Malaysian film scene not only re-signify the relevance of an inter-referencing approach in studying cinema of two countries as reflected in clear parallelism in their film development, but also underscore the main finding of my study: politics becomes cinematic. Indeed, this does not mean that cinema is simply at the center of political battleground or merely an instrument for political struggle. Rather, cinema reconfigures the conditions of sense perception and disrupts the reigning configuration between perception and meaning by articulating the uncounted subject (disallowed view) within society in order to be perceived in a meaningful way.

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