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Indonesian Cinema after the New Order: Going Mainstream

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Abstract

This is a book review of Thomas Barker, *Indonesian Cinema after the New Order: Going Mainstream* (Hong Kong University Press, 2020).

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Barker, Thomas, *Indonesian Cinema after the New Order: Going Mainstream* (Hong Kong University Press, 2020).

Indonesian Cinema after the New Order is a study of the mainstreaming process of the Indonesian film industry after the collapse of the authoritarian Suharto regime in 1998 (*Reformasi*). It especially looks at "significant films, events, people, and decisions that brought Indonesian cinema from its nadir and location on the cultural periphery in the late 1990s into the mainstream where it now enjoys domestic popularity, commercial profitability, and increasingly global attention" (P. 5). The book accompanies other recently published books of similar topics, including van Heeren's *Contemporary Indonesian Film: Spirits of Reform and Ghost from the Past* (2012), Ruppin's *The Komedi Bioscoop: The Emergence of Movie-Going in Colonial Indonesia, 1896-1914* (2016), and Izharuddin's *Gender and Islam in Indonesian Cinema* (2017), extending an attempt in the past decade to establish Indonesian cinema as a field of study (Paramaditha 2017).

It begins with an introductory section setting up the theoretical frameworks, and consists of seven primary chapters that address three sub-themes: the historical and current landscapes, the main genres, and the political economy of contemporary Indonesian cinema. Every chapter starts with a historical investigation of the topic under discussion before it zooms in on the changes and continuities of this topic in post-Suharto conditions.

The book conceptualizes contemporary Indonesian cinema as pop culture or mass-cultural products driven by modern-consumption practices (p. 14). The author draws his conceptual framework from various scholars in sociology, global media, and cultural studies, who observe the importance of studying films as a product of broad relationships and constant negotiations between different interests. A detailed explanation of how the author will use this concept in the rest of the chapters is clear. However, the concept of "the mainstream," which he draws to understand how a pop culture product finds its primary audiences is somewhat

tricky. It methodologically leads the author to focus on a film that belongs to the majority group, (thus) overlooking the heterogeneous nature of pop culture itself.

Chapter One examines the historical landscapes of Indonesian cinema, especially from the early 20th century to 1998. It argues that Indonesian film history represents a battleground between two opposing projects: the commercial and the national cinema. Businessmen of Chinese and Indian descent who entered the country's film industry respectively in the 1920s and 1960s played a significant role in propagating the first project. By the 1950s, the national film project began to spark among local filmmakers and state officials, as they learned the propagation power of film technology from the Japanese invaders. This project found its currency in the 1970s through the 1980s, as Suharto started to fully control the film industry by enacting a series of regulations to assert his power and order. Still, as the author shows, a few commercial films produced during these years managed to score box-office records, and cinema-going was celebrated as an essential part of the nation's popular culture.

Chapter Two zooms in on the changing landscape of film and entertainment industries through the early years of *Reformasi*. The author focuses on how the democratization of the media industry in Post-Suharto Indonesia has allowed some young filmmakers to experiment with new modes of film production to reconnect Indonesian films with mainstream audiences. Examples of this generation include Mira Lesmana, Riri Reza, and Nan Achnas, whose indie film *Kuldesak* (1998) played very well in the country's major cinema chain, the Cinema 21 Group. After the success of *Kuldesak,* other filmmakers began to learn how to make films that entertain and move the audience by revamping new genres, cinematic experiences, and storytelling styles.

In Chapter Three, the author turns to the revival of horror films to show the creativity of young filmmakers to reinvent a new genre that attracts post-1998 film audiences. The horror genre was popular in the 1970s through to the 1990s, but it was considered negatively because

of its association with low-cost production and erotic elements. However, as Barker shows, today's horror films have modernized their ghost stories in such a way that they are relatable to urban-young life settings, imaginations, and experiences, such as in *Jelangkung* (2001) and *Kereta Hantu Manggarai* (*Manggarai Ghost Train*, 2008). Some have also tried to link the ghost stories to Indonesia's unresolved violence of the past, such as the 1965-66 killings in *Lentera Merah* (*Red Lantern*, 2006). This way, young filmmakers are considered by Barker to have successfully transformed the horror genre as a shared language with which they can titillate the audiences and articulate, often with a high degree of reflectivity, the country's collective trauma and fears.

Islamic film is another genre that rose in prominence after *Reformasi*. Barker focuses on films such as *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* (*Verses of Love*, 2018), *Ketika Cinta Bertasbih* (*When Love Exalts God*, 2009), *Hijrah Cinta* (*Love Emigration*, 2014), and *99 Cahaya di Langit Eropa* (*99 Lights in the European Sky*, 2013), to establish his arguments. According to him, films of this genre provide a new form of Islamic fantasies and spectacles – ones that are decorated with modern romance and global imagination – that aim at entertaining new Muslim middle-classes, who have increasingly emerged across the Islamist proclivities since the late 1980s, and who have identified through religion and want it to be represented on screen.

While the rise of Muslim middle classes is instrumental to the rising popularity of Islamic-themed film in post-Suharto Indonesia, it is unfortunate that Barker has overlooked other groups of Muslim middle-class, especially the modernists, whose interest in cinematic practices preceded, if not surpassed, those of the Islamists (van Heeren 2012: 119). As many scholars have pointed out, the expansion of the ranks of the educated Muslim middle classes since the 1980s is viable within the Islamist groups and the traditionalists, as well as modernist societies (Feillard 1997; Hefner 2000). These Muslim middle classes, as I showed elsewhere through the rise of "cinematic *santri*" in traditionalist Muslim societies (Huda 2020), share a

similar attitude toward film media, that is, to cite Barker, as "an important site for the representation and propagation of their ideas" (p. 113). More importantly, *Ayat-Ayat Cinta*, the Islamic film considered by the book to have "realigned the growing film industry with mainstream pop culture in Indonesia" (p. 111), was directed by a filmmaker who publicly declared himself as an affiliated modernist Muslim. That said, I would prefer to maintain that the rise of Islamic-themed films in post-Suharto Indonesia is a response to the new Muslim middle classes that sprung across Islamic communities of various, often conflicting, ideological strands: the modernist, the Islamist, and the traditionalist. It is arguably for this reason that Ariel Heryanto (2014) has called for the significance of viewing the post-Suharto Islamic cinema as a site of cinematic battle among Muslim middle classes of different ideologies, especially concerning how Islam should be presented on screens.

The author's tendency to highlight the Islamist-affiliated Middle classes and their preferred films of Islam was affected by how he defined the Islamic film genre, which I see as somewhat ambiguous and limiting. He writes Islamic films are those that "offer images of piety as *dakwah*," in a sense that "they show how one can lead a life informed by Islamic principles in an age of rapidly changing norms, globalization, temptations, and desires" (p. 122). Such definition raises immediate questions about who has (the rights) to judge whether or not the "image of piety" in an (Islamic-themed) film is a form of "*dakwah*"? Is it the filmmakers, critics, audiences, Muslim scholars, or researchers? Secondly, it will methodologically lead one to focus on films that offer overt visualization of "images of piety" more than on films whose Islamic contents do not conform to the 'mainstream' discourses. While the author discussed at length films that he considered offering the 'piety' norms, Islamic films that portray critical images of Islamic practices, such as *3 Doa 3 Cinta* (*3 Prayers 3 Loves*, 2008) and *Mencari Hilal* (*Finding the Crescent Moon*, 2015) are ignored. The chapter does contain a discussion on some Islamic films that have aroused public controversy, especially those

directed by Hanung Bramantyo, the director of *Ayat-Ayat Cinta*. Nevertheless, the author does it in a way that Bramatyo's films "flirting" with Islam are not the mainstream ones (i.e., not Islamic enough).

To better understand how the category of "Islamic" in a film should be conceptualized, one could look at related scholarship. On defining an Islamicate film of the Indian context, Rachel Dwyer suggests that the Islamic(ate) category should not exclusively refer to the religion itself, but Muslim societies' social and cultural complexities (Dwyer 2006: 97). Likewise, in her analysis of Indonesian Islamic cinema, Alicia Izharuddin writes that Islamic film as a genre is a broad-ranged cinematic convention established among filmmakers, critics, and audiences alike, and aimed at displaying what they consider Islamic on screen and beyond (Izharuddin 2017: 40). It means the Islamic category of a film is located less in the religion per se, than in how it is negotiated among various actors and factors to display the film as Islamic. This way, a definition of Islamic film as a genre should lead one not only to observe the variety of ways by which Islam as a lived religion is exhibited in films but also, more importantly, recognize that the "variety" of Islam represented in the film is all Islamic.

In the last three chapters, Barkers examines the exhibition infrastructure, political economy, and government's policy of the post-Suharto film industry. According to him, investment in film exhibition sectors has shown steady growth. This is evidenced by the expansion of cinema theaters in big and smaller cities, established by new players with big capitals, sometimes in cooperation with global companies. The increase of competition in the exhibition sectors notwithstanding, Cinema 21 Group remains dominating the exhibition field in a way echoing its domination in New Order times—a situation that has frustrated some filmmakers. The production sectors have also seen the coming of some new players. However, no sooner did they arrive than they had to confront remnants of the New Order film industry which are still powerful and have consolidated since 2003. It is proved that by 2008, this sector

had seen the oligopoly of seven film companies linked to the New Order film industry. Still, there is no way in which the inheritance of New Order cinema is more apparent than in the government's film institutions. New Order film laws and censorship regulations were still in operation through the first ten years of *Reformasi*. Filmmakers turned to street politics asking for reform in film laws so that they are allowed to create films that fit the demands of current realities and changing market forces. When new film laws were finally regulated in 2009, however, they continued to perpetuate the New Order's attitudes: to ignore the interests of filmmakers. The book's concluding section is a reflection on how the strategies different actors in the industry have attempted to improve their circumstances could be directed toward better outcomes: the 'presence' of the state in the industry.

The strength of *Indonesian Cinema after the New Order* lies in its detailed description and nuanced analysis, especially on the political economy of the country's film industry. The writing style and structuring of the argument that the author develops are also compelling. I think that its thematic chapters can be used as a resourceful and critical reference for graduate students studying cinema in Southeast Asian contexts and beyond. The chapter on Islamic-themed films is a clear opening space for readers to become familiar with the subject, which could then be supported by scholarship rooted more in Islamic studies. Overall, *Indonesian Cinema after the New Order* is fascinating to read: the combination of its writing style, rich sources, and thoughtful analysis will captivate both scholarly and popular audiences who are interested in studying cinema in a Southeast Asian context.

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